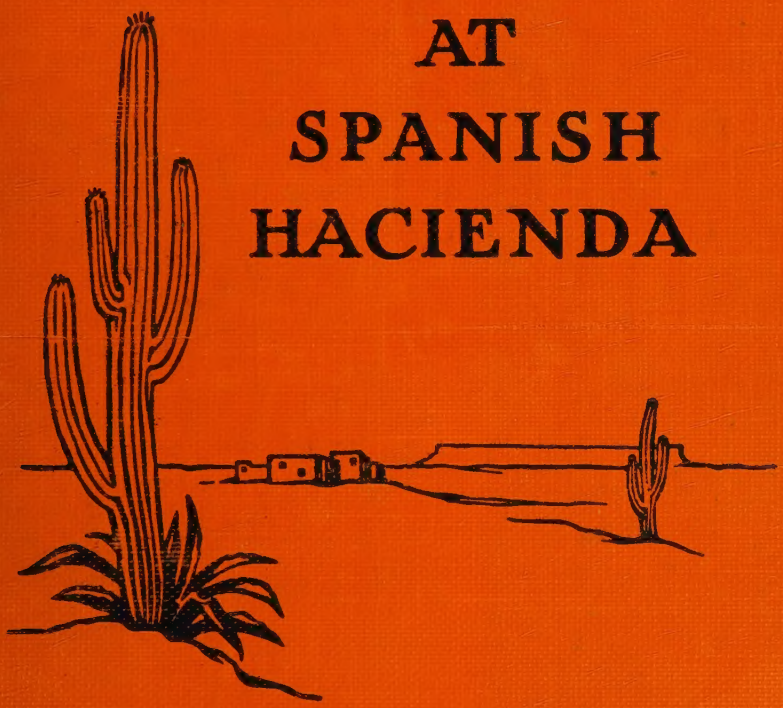
MYSTERY AT SPANISH HACIENDA



JACKSON GREGORY

Grandmother
from
"Buddy"
Xmas 1931

MYSTERY AT SPANISH HACIENDA

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BY

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SENTINEL OF THE DESERT,
EMERALD TRAILS, ETC.

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To Lotus

MYSTERY AT SPANISH HACIENDA

CHAPTER I

THE man lost in the desert and dying of thirst was mocked by visions. He had watched heat hazes quiver and dance and had seen them change magically into cool pools with the greenest of green trees bending over them, trailing dripping branches in the water. He had dashed forward, hurling himself with a little choking cry into the shadowy waters only to fill his mouth with hot sand. The vision faded; momentary sanity returned but to torment him; he lay staring up at the implacable sky, meaning to lie thus until he died. But always some remnant of earth-clinging tenacity prodded him to his feet and he went on.

Once he squatted in the thin, inadequate shade of a creosote bush. His wandering eyes showed him a drear, wind-winnowed expanse of blazing white sand stretching limitlessly north, south, east and west. There were long level stretches where nothing grew, the color of bleached bones; there were hillocks and ridges dotted with sparse dry bushes. The sun beat down pitilessly; he got the impression that the sun was a laughing devil beating on the earth with a red-hot iron rod, like some mad demon striking an enormous copper kettle. He could feel the blows on his ear drums.

From squatting he slipped forward and lay face down. After a long while, during which perhaps he slept or at any rate was mercifully half-unconscious of his tortures, he sat up. Always he saw visions after each fragmentary rest. But never before anything quite like this. A house just yonder, not a hundred

yards away, roof, stove pipe and one end of the wall standing out clear against the hot sky, the rest of the house hidden by a long sand ridge.

If he knew anything he knew that he had stood on that same ridge a little while ago, peering out beneath his hands, striving to fathom the immense distances, seeking a tuft of palms, some sign of water. There had been no house there. He knew. Yet now he saw it.

The thing was disturbingly bright and gay. It had a vivid green roof, the same deep, cool green of the trees drooping about the vanished pools. The walls were soft, cool gray-blue; the one window which he could see above the sand bank was trimmed with a livelier, darker blue—but cool, too. There was a little streamer of smoke from the stove pipe. There were flower boxes under the window and bright red flowers bloomed away as though there were no such things on earth as heat and drought and sandy desert wastes.

He took a step forward and stopped and grew rigid. The gay little house began to move; it appeared to drift along like a yacht on a placid lake, like a swan sailing.

The man buried his face in his hands. Then of a sudden he jerked his head up and began to sniff. He fancied that down through the quiet air floated the fragrance of coffee boiling; surely it was wafted to him from the little house. He fairly leaped forward, new vigor in a wasted body which was almost at the end of all endurance, and tried to call out. Then, dazed, he watched how the house floated on, how it seemed for a moment to be rising up, how then it was surely sinking back into the earth. Lower and lower until only the top of the window, the roof and the stove

pipe were outlined against the horizon. Then only roof and pipe; then the pipe alone.

A smoke stack, a thin wisp of smoke—it was some pleasure steamer voyaging across a deep blue ocean, headed for an island where cool green streams of water ran down to white beaches—

Again he hid his face in his hands. Now he stood weeping, the terrible and agonized weeping of a man who had no tears to moisten the seared, blood-shot eyeballs. But he was no longer able to control himself; he must look again. There was his house once more, no steamer at all but the little house reappearing slowly, bit by bit, lifting from behind the billow of white sand. How gay it was with its green shade at the window; how cool it would be inside.

He began rushing toward it, then checked himself, stood a moment tottering and undecided, a man balanced physically and mentally. Of a sudden he whirled about and began fleeing. Once he glanced over his shoulder; the gay little house was following him! He shrieked aloud; it was the first sound to break through his swollen lips for hours, torn from him by an emotion which could not be made voiceless so long as life fluttered within him. He did not look back again but ran, stumbling and falling and staggering up, plunging out across the empty wastes. When he thought that he heard a voice calling to him he but ran the harder. When he thought some one ran after him he tried to scream again and went on. And when at last he felt a pair of sinewy arms about him he began to fight with them and, fighting, fainted.

CHAPTER II

It was a very drowsy Sunday morning on the Honeycutt ranch; a sluggish morning, even torpid. All Sundays here were listless; this one peculiarly so on account of last night's festivities. Charlie Krebs, the hired man now dragging his heavy feet across the sun-smitten yard on his way from his sleeping quarters in the shed by the hay barn, had gone down to National on the border "to buy himself a pair overalls"; and had returned as the small hours were growing long again sans new overalls, sans sobriety and sans money, his one companion the old demijohn which in its time had made so many trips to National that it might have been expected to know the way if left to itself. The Honeycutt girls had gone to the dance over at Cottonwood Springs, and now, at this late hour in the morning were slap-slapping about in the big kitchen, yawning and gossiping and quarreling as was their sisterly way while picking at scraps of breakfast. In their own fashions they looked nearly as bleary as Charlie Krebs, a jaded, lack-luster, slatternly quartette.

Of a sudden—it was at the moment when Mary and Agnes were contending for the dregs of a dribbling coffee pot—they were made conscious of an explosive commotion out in the yard. A boy of nine or ten, the youngest and to-day the most nearly wide-awake of the brood of Honeycutt, came charging to the house, whooping at the top of his lungs. Chickens and turkeys scattered right and left, vocally protesting though flee

they must; the one one-eyed rooster, nearly stepped on, squawked and flew; the two white pigs rooting by the watering trough lifted their ooze-dripping snouts and sniffed inquisitively.

"What's eatin' Benny?" demanded Agnes. "Got a bee inside his shirt or what?"

"Stepped on a snake, maybe," suggested Martha. "Get out of my way, can't you, Jennie? I got at the window first."

"Circus!" yelled the flying Benny, waving his old straw hat.

Charlie Krebs, half way across the bare yard, stopped to teeter a moment and look about him owlishly. From last night's orgy he was still as thick of utterance as of wits. He rubbed his eyes, shook his head, pulled down on his eyelids, a habit he had, and craned his neck as though it were easier to stare around a corner of one of the clutter of outhouses than to step along far enough to see what was beyond.

"If I ain't got the tee-dees," said Krebs, "it is a circus—or somethin'."

Jennie, the youngest sister, only eighteen but, "as she took after her father" as she often said, a hulking young woman who could pitch hay with any man of the Honeycutt outfit, shoved Martha out of her way and met her little brother Benny at the door.

"Have you gone crazy or what?" she asked, catching him by the arm.

"Quit your pinchin' me," snapped Benny. And, all in one breath with the request, "I tell you it's a circus, just the other side the old cow-barn you can't see from here but I say it is."

"Circus your foot," said the Amazonian Jennie in her Amazonian voice. "What is it, ninny?"

"There *is* something out there," said Agnes from the window, clearing her eyes of the straight strands of honey colored hair which hung in wisps about her face. "Looks like—Land sakes! What on earth is it?"

"I tell you—" began Benny.

But his sister Jennie turned him square about and thrust him down the back steps again, commanding tersely:

"Go find out just what it is, ninny."

"And see what sort of a man it is, Benny," called Mary.

Benny was gone so long, disappearing behind the cow-barn, that Charlie Krebs finally went after him. And, in his turn, Krebs was for so long a time out of sight that the four sisters were tempted to venture forth themselves. Yet now was no time for precipitancy. At least one man would be out there "with whatever it was," maybe more than one; and Mary, Agnes, Martha and Jennie were agreed upon the one point if upon no other, that none of them looked her best just now. It was the question of a stranger arrived at their door, and always in their hopeful maiden meditations a stranger might be anything. But here at last, with many a backward look, came Benny.

"It ain't a circus exac'ly," he admitted grudgingly. "I guess it's a kind of store on wheels—"

"Store?" giggled Martha. "What's the boy talking about?"

"Well, anyway, it's a little house that horses pull and there's everything in it and on the carts it pulls along after it," maintained Benny. "I saw in the door, and one of the canvases was sort of pushed back and I could see pots and pans and saddles and spurs and machinery and ropes and augurs and guns and pulleys

and tools and boxes and bags of things and churns—"

"What kind of a man is he, Benny?" asked the thoughtful Mary.

"He was stopped, readin' the big sign the sheriff tacked up on the cow-barn," said Benny. "An old man with whiskers all over his face; a long face, too, like a horse—"

"Come ahead; let's go see," called Jennie and led the way.

Thus assured by their little brother that their stranger was only an old man with whiskers all over his face, they trooped out, spending no further thoughts upon their Sunday morning array. Red and yellow wrappers flapping about them, their hair in various degrees of untidiness, bare feet in worn slippers or old shoes, they trooped out across the yard. From the first glimpse of what the cow-barn hid they began exclaiming. Step by step, as fresh wonders dawned for them, exclamations increased in intensity and number.

First of all, there was the little house, very bright and gay with red and green and blue paint and with its blooming flower boxes. It ran on wheels, was evidently reared upon the chassis of a long bodied truck, and pulled by a sturdy team of six horses. One could not take in everything at a glance; far from it. Yet there were the horses, the house-wagon or, more properly, the wagon-house; behind it a canvas-covered, two-wheeled trailer; behind that another trailer, also with its canvas. Tethered to the final trailer a Jersey milk cow and a saddle horse, proud head lifted, ears tipped forward.

"It has doors and windows and everything! Look; the front door opens up so the driver can sit inside—and it's got a little porch instead of a dash-board—"

"And look at the flowers; all in bloom!"

The driver, he who, as Benny had said, had been reading the remnants of the poster tacked on the barn, got down and turned toward them. The four Honeycutt girls stopped dead in their tracks and, with common impulse, glared at their little brother. The man did have a beard; that was certain. A jet black beard of perhaps ten days growth. But, equally certain, he could have appeared "old" to no one not of Benny's extreme youth. Agnes whipped back and hid herself behind her ample sister, Jennie. Jennie clutched her faded wrapper with both hands and strove ineffectually to conceal ragged shoes and bare ankles.

The stranger, tall and sparse and brown, stood regarding them with a look of profound gravity in his eyes. He still kept the reins in his hand; one booted foot rested on the hub of the wheel over which he had climbed down in his very leisurely descent; from his attitude alone it could not have been told whether he was just getting down or preparing to step up. After a moment he lifted his free hand to the wide brimmed black Stetson topping the something more than six feet of him, removed the hat in the same unhurried way that marked all his gestures and broke the silence which had fallen. His deep gravity remained; his voice was low and soft and, like himself, unhurrying. A lingering drawl, unmistakably that of a Southerner, was oddly in keeping with the man's every look and act; so to speak it completed and crowned the harmoniousness of him.

"Good morning, ladies." (It was almost, yet not quite: "Good mawnin'.") "I'd be considerably grieved if I thought I was trespassing on you folks."

"A store on wheels, that's what he's got!" exclaimed Charlie Krebs. "Step up ladies and buy your rig-a-ma-jigs. Haw!"

The tall man gave no sign that he heard. He looked in an oddly impersonal sort of manner from one to another of the four girls until his eyes, unsmiling and noncommittal, had rested in turn upon each of their faces.

They were not young women easily nonplussed, but they did know their moment of what amounted almost to confusion. "An old man with whiskers all over his face" was description of a sort to make them all envision stooped form, white beard, senility. Here was a man who simply hadn't shaved for ten days; remove the crisp black growth and he still might be—anything.

Agnes, the oldest of the four sisters, feeling the family honor and dignity in her keeping, was opening her mouth to say something when Jennie, the youngest and pertest, forestalled her with a flippant:

"We don't want to buy anything, mister." Feeling that she had been taken at a disadvantage, vaguely resentful, she very naturally felt like venting her spite on the cause of the situation. "Pa don't like peddlers around, anyway," she poured forth for full measure.

He listened attentively, still standing hat in hand though the sun beat down with the full heat of mid-morning; when she had done he turned for the first time toward Charlie Krebs, saying gravely:

"This is your father?"

"Good Lord, no!" cried Jennie, red with shame, as the blowsy face of Krebs wreathed itself in a pleased grin. "That's just Charlie Krebs, a hired man."

"I'll bet he's got some nice things to sell, though,"

whispered Martha, tugging at Mary's sleeve as she strove to peep in at one of the windows. "Let's go get dressed and come back."

"Seems like to me, stranger," observed Charlie Krebs, scratching his head as one who would cudgel his drowsy brain and stir some luke-warm memory, "I've seen that horse of yours somewhere." He pointed to the high headed black saddle horse tethered with the Jersey to the rear trailer.

The stranger volunteering no remark, Krebs scratched his head again, shook it once or twice and then fell to whittling. But again and again he looked curiously at the horse.

Agnes and Jennie, seeing their sisters beginning to withdraw, understood their impelling motive immediately, and were quick to follow suit.

"We're having breakfast, mister," Agnes explained. "Then we'll come out and see what you've got. That won't do any hurt, I guess."

He made no effort to stay them; for a moment he stood looking thoughtfully into the crown of his hat. Then, replacing the hat on his head, he transferred his meditative gaze briefly to the notice in bold black letters on the side of the barn.

"How far down to Nacional?" he asked.

Both Benny and Charlie Krebs started to answer, but Benny got the words out first and Krebs remained with his mouth open as though owlishly determined to be ready for the next observation.

"Twenty mile, mister."

"Your father isn't at home?"

Krebs again, despite his advantage, lost out as Benny replied:

"Nope. Down to Nacional. Went last night and ain't got back. Gamblin', I guess. Drinkin', too."

"Yep; that's about right," muttered Charlie Krebs. "Your mother?"

"Gone," said Benny unemotionally. "Her and pa had a big row last week and ma, she took her things and went."

"Yep; she did that," said Krebs.

"What did you want ma and pa for?" asked Benny. "Want to sell 'em somethin'?"

"I have to go down to Nacional," the stranger told him. "My team is tired; they had to pull through sand all day yesterday and again most of this morning. I'd ride the black there, and leave my outfit here for a few hours if I had permission."

"Guess that would be all right," hazarded Benny.

"I'd pull on a bit, out of the way; across the fields yonder where the spring is. Will you run to the house like a good kid and ask your sisters?"

"I'll go ask Aggie," said Benny and went on his errand.

"Seems like I've seen *you,* too, somewheres," said Krebs.

The stranger mounted to his seat. It was a comfortable chair just inside his front door; his long legs were thrust out upon his little front porch. Charlie Krebs stared wonderingly.

"Cripes!" he ejaculated under his breath. He stepped closer and craned his neck in an unhidden effort to see all that might be seen.

"Say! You got some one with you! Sick man?"

The stranger nodded and released his brake.

"I'll wait over at the spring," he said. The six

horses thrust their stalwart necks deep into their collars and the house moved off slowly, the trailers followed, led horse and cow brought up the rear. Charlie Krebs burst into laughter and slapped the dust out of his overalls. Then again he fell to scratching his head.

"I know that jasper and I know that horse," he said aloud. "But I can't place 'em."

As though his heavy feet had grown roots he stood staring after them, his face screwed up as, now and then, he pulled at his eyelids as though he would sharpen his sight thereby and peer through all subterfuges.

"I've seen 'em somewheres. Now a man might forget another man's face, anyhow when it's run to whiskers; but a man never ought to forget a horse.—And that jasper won't help out any. He's the kind that won't say yes and won't say no."

He shook his head, back and forth, back and forth. He was still at it when, twenty minutes later, the four Honeycutt girls, dressed in their Sunday best, three in big picture hats and Jennie twirling a Japanese parasol, came trooping out, bent on investigation—and perhaps on conquest.

CHAPTER III

"I GUESS it would be all right for you to leave your things here for a spell," said Agnes. "While you rode down to the border. Pa ain't here; he's got business down to Nacional that's a-keeping him. Oh, that's all right; you don't have to thank me, that I know of. I guess there ain't any charge for just using water and air around here. But of course if you wanted pasture for your stock, or hay—"

He shook his head and nodded toward his horses; each of them, the cow, too, was busy with the dregs of grain in a nose bag. He had removed the six bits, replacing them with halters.

As before he stood with his hat in his hand, regarding his four callers impersonally. Agnes, having finished her little speech, grew silent and, for a space, the others were silent with her. Jennie twirled her Japanese parasol, inviting investigation. The tall stranger twirled his hat. Of a sudden, her normal reaction to the strain of several consecutive seconds of silence, Martha giggled. Her sisters looked at her reprovingly. Agnes cleared her throat and offered with her own brand of dignity:

"And I guess we don't want to buy anything, but as long as you've come, we might as well look at your things."

"Oh." For a moment they thought that he was about to smile. But it was no more than a passing glint of light in his eyes and after it his gravity remained.

"He'll have tablecloths; and lace and silk kimonos," said Mary. "All peddlers do."

He appeared interested, as though learning something.

"Have you those things?" asked Agnes, thinking what a slow-poke he was.

He shook his head.

"No. I'm sorry, but I haven't."

Agnes began to wonder if by any chance, no matter how remote, he was making fun of her. So she spoke a trifle tartly, meaning to set him down squarely in his place.

"What have you to sell, then?"

At last he did smile. The man was in no sense of that Apolloesque order of which matinée idols are made. His face, as Benny had said of it, was altogether too long for that sort of thing, the nose too large, the mouth too big; a rugged face. But when he smiled one forgot all that, ignored it entirely. It was a smile of unbounded good nature, of sheer shining gladness. There is no imitating that sort of thing; in its very nature it is a burst of pure spontaneity. It is what, among the motion picture fraternity, would be known as "a million dollar smile."

"Sorry, Miss—but I haven't a thing to sell."

Agnes, for a moment spellbound, watched the smile come and go and then bit her lip, coloring hotly.

"Benny said—Charlie Krebs said—"

She whirled upon Krebs who had followed them. But he did not even see her. He was staring with all his might at the stranger and was again scratching his head and puckering a bewildered face.

"I've seen that grin somewheres—on this same man—"

"You told me it was a store, you know you did, Charlie Krebs," cried Agnes, defending herself.

"Your name ain't Bettinger, is it, Stranger?" demanded Krebs. "You didn't work once for old man Crawford in the Panhandle country?"

The stranger nodded.

"Right you are," he drawled. "Right both times."

Krebs pondered the reply and in the end made less than nothing at all of it.

"What do you mean, I'm right? That you are or that you ain't Bettinger? That you did or that you didn't work for old man Crawford?"

"Exactly," said the tall man. "Right you are again."

Jennie tittered.

"It's all so funny I could scream," she told all present, hers never the voice to discuss secrets.

Thereafter ensued an unruffled silence quite like that which had fallen upon them once before. It would appear that the conference was at an end. A sad and unsatisfactory ending, too, for all but one of them.

Mary tried.

"Charlie says you've got a sick man with you," she said sympathetically. He admitted the fact with a glance. "Anything we can do?" asked Mary.

"You are very kind. No, there's nothing. He'll be all right."

And here again all talk died. They shifted a bit and glanced at one another. He alone seemed unaware that silence had fallen upon them. Perhaps he was used to being alone in the quiet places of the world; some men grow to the acceptance of the strange belief that conversation isn't at all essential when there is nothing to be said.

And so, in a little while, they trailed off and left

him, chattering like magpies, arms linked, merry volleys of laughter sent back to give him a hint of all that he was missing. Half way across the field Jennie turned to signal with her parasol and scream back the invitation:

"You can come to dinner at the house, if you get hungry. We chuck it on the table at two on Sundays."

"If it ain't a circus and ain't a store—well, what is it?" demanded Benny at his sisters' heels.

That was what Charlie Krebs wanted to know. He remained near the stranger's outfit; he exerted himself to be entertaining, to establish a pleasant social relationship and, in the end, to draw the newcomer out. He began with a reference to the demijohn of the many expeditions across the international boundary; having expounded on the excellencies of the Mexican liquor, with equal mind to taste, immediate effect and resultant after-glow, he suggested that his listener—if he were listening—might crave a man-sized drink. The stranger regarded him gravely; he may have been making a study of Charlie Krebs' blowzy visage and finding in it a further testimonial to the prowess of the liquid fire from across the border; and in the end confessed that he was at the present moment sensible of no such craving as Krebs hinted at. Whereupon Krebs looked his very natural bewilderment.

The stranger went about establishing his temporary encampment and Charlie Krebs, squatting on his heels and whittling, watched him with an interest which mounted to fresh heights. The horses, having had water and grain, were tethered in the shade of a big cottonwood. Then they were curried and brushed until they shone like polished metal. It was easy to see that the animals were used to the grooming and reveled in

it; they invited it, each watching the master while awaiting his coming; they enjoyed it as a dog enjoys having his ears pulled or his back scratched for him. Krebs shook his head a dozen times during the operation; if any horse on the Honeycutt ranch had ever had such treatment it was not to the knowledge of Charlie Krebs.

Last to come under curry-comb and brush was the saddle horse. The stranger went over every inch of the really superb animal and one with half an eye could see that here was a task not of duty alone but of love. Even Charlie Krebs glimpsed something of a relationship which he could not in the least understand; in his dull brain a horse was only a horse. You couldn't get away from the prime truths: A horse was a horse just as a dog was a dog or a man a man. You rode and worked the horse until he failed you and then shot him; you kicked the dog; you got what you could out of the other man. Yet this stranger, who Charlie Krebs began to understand was a bit "queer," appeared blind to the prime truths; he actually loved the great black brute and in return the black brute loved him.

Krebs, being ignored, drew nearer. Where had he seen that horse, now; and where had he seen the man?

"I wouldn't get too close," came a careless, drawling warning.

Krebs laughed.

"Oh, me, I know horses—"

"Look out!"

Krebs "looked out," but not a split second too soon. The horse swung toward him, ears laid back, the whites of eyes showing, savage teeth glistening. There was a snap sounding in the startled man's ears like a pistol shot; had he stood six inches nearer then it

must have been at the cost of the side of his face. He leaped backward; as he did so the horse whirled and lashed out at him with both hind hoofs. Again Krebs was so fortunate as to save the life in his unlovely carcass by the move he made, one for which he had to thank not his agility but his clumsiness. He lost his balance and went down, sitting; the flailing hoofs whistled over his head. He rolled out of the way and sat up again. His red face had gone white and now flamed redder than ever as from his flabby lips flowed his foul verbal overflow. Now neither the horse nor its master paid him the slightest attention.

He was about to take himself off sullenly when his interest was snared afresh. The stranger, having completed the grooming and tied the saddle horse among the cottonwoods, returned to his wagon and set his hand to some sort of lever near the brake. Two poles, one at each end of the house, until now held upright, came slowly down until they extended horizontally from their hinged bases. They brought down with them, from its place on the roof, a panel of interwoven wire framed in light bamboo rods. And in some few seconds Charlie Krebs saw a little chicken wire enclosure come into being alongside the wagon. He saw, further, how a long plank just under the flower boxes opened outward to become a shelf; how out upon it, from boxes until now hidden, stepped a dozen feather-ruffling white Leghorn hens; how they went down into their little pen and started scratching. And, finally, how an amazingly diminutive bantam rooster surely not six inches from spurred heel to cocky crest, stepped forth upon the shelf and flapped his wings and emitted his shrill, cracked but inordinately important crow. The stranger tossed his flock some handfuls of

grain and went to the rear of his house. A pair of steps tumbled down at a touch; he mounted them, stooped for the little doorway and went in. Krebs, hurrying to look after him, saw the door close.

"Cripes!" he ejaculated. And after a while, pausing uncertainly now and then and stopping to turn back and pull at his eyelids, he went back to the house. "Cripes!"

It was late in the afternoon before Benny reported signs of any purposeful activity out under the cottonwoods. The stranger was getting a saddle out from under the canvas of one of the little carts. Saddle and bridle—gee, the bridle must be all silver! Saddle, too; it hurt your eyes in spots to look at it. Say, he was getting another saddle and bridle. He was saddling the big black horse. Another horse, too; a long-bodied bay that had worked in the lead. Left this one, though, tied to a wagon wheel. And here he came now, riding the black—

Gee! He was all dolled up for fair! Showy black chaps, clean white shirt that looked more and more silken as he came closer; a handkerchief as red as fire around his neck. Look how his spurs flashed! They hurt your eyes, too—

He would pass near the house; perhaps he was coming to make a belated call? The four girls were on the porch; Benny was with them; Krebs was in the yard.

Benny pointed out much. The one thing which he ignored was the one thing his sisters noted first. The stranger had shaved. He came close enough for them to see details; he was going to pause a moment at least. A little flutter of excitement indicated itself among his fair watchers. Not exactly handsome; no, he wasn't even a bit handsome. But there was something

about him—something about the mouth, unhidden now. Gravity still dwelt there; and yet there was a suggestion, vague but insistent, of humor. Here was reserve on the surface; behind it, one felt, there was a leaping spirit. A spirit that would reveal itself rarely, perhaps, and to but few; but which, when it did come forth would not do so by slow degrees but at one triumphant bound.

"You ladies are most kind to let me pitch camp here for a spell," he said. "I'm grateful to you. It's best to tell you I'm leaving my friend out there alone. He'd better be left that way to-day. I wouldn't go near him if I happened to be in any of your places."

He had lifted his hat; he bowed now, replaced it and galloped off.

And here came Charlie Krebs running and mouthing excitedly.

"I got him now! Told you I knowed that horse. I remember the horse and I remember the man and I remember the saddle! Silver everywhere, fine hand-carved leather— It was at Pendleton, two years ago. He got the saddle as the big prize and must of bought the horse. Black Dynamite they called the horse. And that feller rode him. Only man that ever did. Cripes!"

He stared wonderingly, then admiringly, after the departing figure.

"Rapidan, that's who," he said in an awestruck voice. "It's Rapidan!"

CHAPTER IV

NACIONAL was an ugly little spot festering upon the international boundary. A score of deep, cool wells gave it pure water; pure air, sun-drenched, bathed it in the hot day and, starlit, through the cool, fresh nights. Thus God gave unstintedly of his sweet purity; and here all purity ended. The water was used to sprinkle upon dirt floors for the sake of coolness, men preferring to drink other beverages; the air was tainted in passing.

The sun was setting when the stranger came to the little low hills half-circling Nacional on the north. He stopped on the top of a knoll and sat motionless, looking into the heart of the sunset. A red sun-down it was, flaming, tropical. In the distance a clump of desert palms with their naked boles like bare poles and their tufts crowning them like big feather dusters, stood black against the encrimsoned horizon. Black and red.

Nothing but black and red would the eye of any man of Nacional have seen. In the beginning God had given them eyes to see all things, and they had used them to find out the bigger pieces of meat in their stews, the number of black spots on rolling dice, the distinguishing features on playing cards, the nature of the liquor in thick glasses. Here, now, came a man essentially different. He still could see beauty; he drank of it through his eyes; he felt it thrill along into his soul. He saw more than the red and the black. There were faint tender blues and the palest of apple greens; tremulous pinks in long wavering lines; soft amethysts

on the billowing earth bournes swelling up into the glory of the sunset. Rare faint colorings set there for him who might see them. He saw.

Men who knew him—they were few—knew this of him: That he was not like other men in that glory, glimpsed often, remained glorious in his marvelling sight. With nearly all men the most glittering pageantry which the world could afford will pall if seen repeatedly, over and over and over. Startled at first sight, something within them thrills like a violin with the wonder; glimpsed day after day, the picture is commonplace and no longer stirs. The glory is still there but must await new eyes; reactions to its stimulus have grown fainter and fainter and at last are gone. And so with each man, passing from experience to experience, there must come the acceptance of the tragic plaint: "There hath passed away a glory from the earth."

But here, now, came a man who was not as other men in this. He sat motionless a long while, looking out across the darkening, billowing sweep of earth, into the heart of a sunset—and in his eyes was the look of one who for the first time in his life has seen the beauty of the end of a day. He breathed deep, then scarcely seemed to breathe at all; a look of sheer rapture softened the ruggedness of his face. He marvelled afresh "that such things could be!"—as he would marvel tomorrow to see the same golden glory burst upward from beyond the distant hills.

Had he sought to put into words what he felt, he must have said simply:

"Watch the sun come up in the morning as if it was the first sunup and the last sunup you'd ever see—and you'll get a lot out of the day!"

He came jingling into Nacional in the soft afterglow. Spur chains and bridle chains clanked musically. He rode among squat ugly adobe houses that seemed to have grown up from the soil like toadstools; passed a big sway-backed barn and feed yard; cantered through a swiftly increasing number of barking dogs and dismounted at a frame building which announced itself with a rough and ready sign as store and post office. Reins in hand, he stepped to their length and so in at the open door. To the postmaster, a thin wisp of a straw colored man, he said:

"A while back I wrote a letter addressed to Mr. Barfoot or any other lawyer—"

"Any but one!" said the postmaster in a thin, rather eager voice. "Care of the postmaster; that's me. I remember."

"Do you remember if it got to Mr. Barfoot?"

"It did."

"Thanks. Happen to know if he's about? And where?"

"Eatin' supper, most likely, about now. At the Stag restaurant, across the line."

"Thanks."

He was going when the postmaster with a dry cackle, observed:

"There was somethin' funny about addressin' a letter like that. It made me laugh, only half seein' the joke. Barfoot laughed too.—Any lawyer *but* Alford Jennings—"

From without came the soft jingle of spurs and bridle chains. The tall man on the black horse was gone; not toward the Mexican clutter of adobes across the international line, but back up the road. The postmaster watched and saw him turn into the feed yard

and ten minutes later saw him returning on foot.

"If Barfoot ain't at the Stag lunch counter, *or* in the bar, *or* in the card room in back," called the postmaster, "you might round him up in his room, upstairs over the Poco Mas saloon."

He had a nod, a quiet, "Thanks," and the passing on of long, leisurely steps for answer. The man questing Attorney Barfoot "or any other lawyer but Alford Jennings," pausing for scarcely more than an exchange of appraising glances with the customs official and waved on, stepped across the magic line which makes aliens of all who cross it and was in old Mexico.

At the Stag lunch counter, where several men lounged over coffee and high-spiced dishes, he asked in Spanish for Barfoot and was directed to the bar, a few feet further along in the barn-like room. The dispenser of alcohol in its many inferior forms, a small Mexican with large eyes and mustaches, looked him over languidly, shrugged and indicated listlessly that Barfoot, though he had been here a moment ago, had vanished. A glance into the card room satisfied the stranger that the man he sought was not there; a couple of Cocopa bucks, very gaudy as to flaming scarves and very dull and dirty as to everything else looked at him stolidly; a half-breed boy in an enormous cone-crowned hat with a red cord about it caught with a silver buckle, strummed at a guitar and sang softly and very sweetly; a young blonde-haired American cowboy, extravagantly booted and chapped, extravagantly young, slouched a trifle dramatically in his seat playing cards with a couple of suave Mexicans.

The stranger withdrew and sought the Poco Mas saloon. It was noisier and gayer here, but he did not look inside. There was a lamp burning in an upper

room and an exposed stairway toward the rear led directly to the upper story. He climbed the steep steps and knocked at the door to which they led.

"Who's there?" called a voice.

Under most circumstances, meeting an individual for the first time, we see him before we hear his voice; we have made some sort of swift judgment in a flash, marking his eyes or his mouth or his hands or his clothes. It results that there is something intriguing with its own spice and piquancy, in coming at a new acquaintance through the ear instead of through the eye. It is a situation which may come about when two men meet in the dark. One is never satisfied until he has put the new acquaintance down somewhere in his rogues' gallery of mental pictures and impressions; he must judge every man and lose no time doing it. Having only a voice to build upon, he none the less builds. He even pictures his man physically, no matter if enforcedly vaguely.

Men who live alone a great deal have time to think. That is a fact which is overlooked, serenely ignored, by many of vaunted sophistication who assign to the mountaineer, the desert dweller, a bovine status of simple rumination; of chewing the cud of what is past; of reflecting as a cow reflects that has fed full and soaks in the sunshine. But, whereas the "sophisticated" have ten thousand other men's ideas passed along to them that, doing some indifferent culling among them they may select those acceptable, the solitary man is a good deal more likely to build up his own thoughts upon what he has come upon, himself, first hand. No one has told him how to get where he is going. He blazes his own trails.

Rapidan had a theory about voices: That you came

upon your man more exactly through his utterance and the very quality of it, than through his facial expression. For he set a guard on his face; he stimulated the necessary little muscles when his judgment told him: "Here is one to placate. Here is one to patronize. Here one to sit at poker with." True, such a man would modulate his voice; but the essential quality itself of the voice remained and was what a lifetime of one sort or another made it. The interest Rapidan had brought to watching a sunset was no greater than, though quite different from, that which he now bent on Barfoot's voice.

That voice was profoundly deep; one felt that it came not from the throat alone but from deep down in a mighty chest; it was like the low, reverberating note of a pipe organ. In volume full; resonant, thunderous, it remained strangely musical; a large voice? Why not? One speaks of voices sharp, thin, edged, smooth; this one was grandiosely large. Yet being large it was not, as one expects of big things, slow-moving. Quick, hasty, eager instead. The deep pipe organ notes sounded with staccato movement.

To the question, "Who's there?" came the drawling answer:

"Most likely you'd not remember my name. I wrote you a letter about six weeks ago, saying I'd be coming on this way. A letter about a ranch, the Bill Smith place."

"Rapidan? Rapidan, with the long string of initials? You're Rapidan?"

"Yes."

In the room Barfoot could now be heard moving toward the door, shambling along. A bolt was shot

back, the door whisked open. Lamp in hand Barfoot looked out, then said in the heavy yet brisk voice:

"Come in."

Rapidan found time to ask himself why a man should have his door bolted, even while he was taking stock of the lawyer. A large man, large as to clean shaven face, large as to neck bared above collarless neck-band, large as to rounded shoulders filling the shiny black frock coat, large as to hands and feet and girth; yet a man less tall by several inches than Rapidan himself. He moved oddly as he went to set the lamp on a table, having rebolted the door; not so much with a limp as with a sidewise lurch. The right leg missed by an inch being as long as the left.

There were three chairs in the shabby room. Barfoot occupied two of them, easing his enormous form down into one, and lifting his thick legs to stretch out across the other. The third he indicated to his visitor.

"Squat," he said, "and sing your ditty."

"Since you got my letter—I'll do the listening."

Barfoot regarded him a moment with over-full, mild brown eyes. Then he reached out to the walnut table on which the lamp stood, opened the single drawer and drew out the only paper it contained: Rapidan's letter written in lead pencil.

"The Bill Smith ranch," said Barfoot. "Twelve hundred eighty acres. North of the Spanish Hacienda place. All live stock. Hm. Yes. That's the place." He glanced through the brief note and lifted his large eyes to Rapidan's face. "Signed, J. R. P. W. J. D. Rapidan."

Rapidan nodded. Barfoot mused a moment, then tossed the paper back into the drawer.

"I've looked up the title," he said. "Even swap, your place in California for this, you assuming any encumbrances. One encumbrance only, as you were correctly informed; a six hundred dollar mortgage held by Alarcon of Spanish Hacienda. Mortgage, however, applies only to the eighty acres on which the ranch buildings are. You remember the old fence back of the house?"

"I haven't been out there yet," said Rapidan.

"You mean you haven't seen the place at all? That you bought it without once seeing it?"

"Swapped for it," Rapidan reminded him.

"But without seeing it?"

"That's the way I got the California place I swapped for it," said Rapidan. "Took it in that way on a trade for a claim I had picked up out in Nevada."

"And got the claim the same way, I suppose?" offered Barfoot who supposed nothing of the sort.

Rapidan nodded.

"You're pretty much on the trade, I take it," said Barfoot.

Again Rapidan nodded.

"Soon as not take on a cat in a sack, eh?"

"Yes. Sometimes you get a real good cat that way. —You got the bill I stuck in the letter?"

"I got it." His full eyes became low-lidded and grew shrewd. "Rapidan, you're a lucky man!"

Rapidan looked to him for the explanation.

"I invested your money in a stack of chips," said Barfoot. "Won nine hundred dollars on it before I was done. Your money is lucky money, sir. I'd like more of it!"

"You believe in that sort of thing?" asked Rapidan curiously.

Ask a boy six years old if he believes in Santa Claus and note the look spreading across his face. Such a look did Barfoot turn now on his questioner.

"Of course I believe it. I know it."

Had you handed him his old hat from the nail on the wall and asked him what it was, he would have employed absolutely the same tone of matter of fact certainty in answering, "That's my hat." Yet one must remember that he was a lawyer; an old, case-hardened lawyer. Rapidan remembered, and was interested. But he made no remark.

"How'd it happen," said Barfoot suddenly, "that you wanted any lawyer but Alford Jennings?"

"I knew no one here personally. I talked with Bill Smith with whom I was trading—"

"Bill Smith," Barfoot cut in, heavy and quick, "was an outright low-down rascal. Never did anything right —outside having hay-fever. Anything he said ought to go backward. If he ran a man down, that man ought to be all right. And vice versa, Mr. Rapidan."

"So I judged," said Rapidan drily. "Between sneezes he recommended Alford Jennings and that's why I wanted any one else."

The queerest imaginable look came over Barfoot's large face. It was a look baffling interpretation. Then of a sudden he laughed. Rapidan fancied that the lamp chimney on the walnut table was set vibrating.

"Me," cried Barfoot, red-faced with mirth, "I'm Alford Jennings!"

His visitor's eyebrows shot upward sharply.

"Your letter said, 'Barfoot or any lawyer but Alford Jennings.' It sure puzzled the poor little hay-colored postmaster. He had to show it to me to get good legal advice, since there isn't any other lawyer in Nacional.

I took a good look at it, felt it over, figured out there was money in it and gave my legal opinion. He should hand it to Barfoot, as addressed."

"And Barfoot?" asked Rapidan, lifted brows slowly coming down.

The man in the chair stuck out his right leg.

"A bit short, that leg, Mr. Rapidan. The boys say that was caused by my standing long hours at the bar—not the legal bar, you understand!—right foot on the rail! So Barfoot's been my name, half the time, for a dozen years or so."

Rapidan said nothing. He was recalling that Bill Smith had mentioned Barfoot as a lawyer; and until now it had not dawned on him that Barfoot and Alford Jennings were one and the same. Barfoot—or Alford Jennings—watched him, eyes twinkling and broke out laughing a second time.

"By the way," he offered, his mirth subsiding as suddenly as it had come upon him, "you know Bill Smith got his, don't you?"

"Meaning?"

"Killed. Murdered and burned up besides. Wouldn't say, either, that it didn't serve him right."

Here was news! Rapidan demanded particulars. *When?*

"Last month. On or about the sixth. Hammered over the head with an ax, dumped into a shed, the whole thing set on fire."

"The sixth? Four days after I did business with him."

"On or about the sixth," repeated Barfoot. "Not later than the sixth."

"Poor devil. Where'd it happen? On the ranch I'd just traded him?"

"On the ranch he'd just traded you! Where you're headed now."

"But I left him in California; I saw him there on the third. He didn't say anything about making a trip back here."

"He was that way. Didn't tell a soul here that he was getting out of this country and getting him a ranch in California."

"Find out who killed him?" asked Rapidan casually.

"Yes. Man named Terril; Jim Terril. Caught him, put him across in record time, found him guilty, sentenced him—and lost him! He made a clean get-away. And he's gone clean."

"Reward offered for him, isn't there? Thousand dollars?"

"Out after it?" asked Barfoot, looking shrewd again.

"Saw the sheriff's notice. Didn't know the man was supposed to have killed Bill Smith though."

"Supposed?"

"From what you've said I judge no one saw him do it?"

"There were four men, though, that swore to having heard him say he was going to kill Smith. Just a day or two before. He didn't care who knew."

"So he confessed?"

"No; course not. After it was done he'd try to lie out of it. Who wouldn't, come cool-blood time? I defended the poor sucker, too; hated to take the money at that. It was open and shut all along that he'd have to swing."

"You knew he was guilty, a murderer, yet you took his money and tried to save him?"

"My Gawd!" said Barfoot in mock dismay. "Have I been entertaining a missionary?"

Rapidan was glancing about the squalid room. There were long black festoons of cobwebs about the windows, in the dusty webs countless dead flies. A door to an adjoining room stood open; he could see the bed there, an old dingy blue mattress showing, the quilt half on the floor. In a corner of the room in which they sat stood an old rifle, one of obsolete make; a spider had done a pretty piece of weaving in the space between trigger and trigger guard. Rapidan sat looking at it for a long while.

"I'd like to ask you a question," he said abruptly.

"Fire away," said Barfoot. "If it's a professional opinion, five bucks for an off hand opinion; if not in the way of business, free gratis."

Rapidan stacked five silver dollars on the table.

"Perhaps not strictly professional, but let's pay our way," he said, his drawl very pronounced. "Here's my question: How do you regard coincidences?"

Barfoot sat very still, brooding. Then he reached out for the silver pieces, sat chinking them a while and in the end put them into his pocket.

"An answer to that is worth five dollars of any man's money," he said. Rapidan had put his question in full gravity and in profound gravity did the lawyer consider it. He began pulling at his loose lower lip, drawing it out slowly and to an extent that suggested the absurd thought that it was of rubber, then letting it snap back into place with a soft "plup."

He got up and shambled across the room to a narrow cupboard in the wall which Rapidan had not noticed. There were three fat books there, a dictionary,

a medical volume, a much worn copy of the Arabian Nights. He brought the dictionary back to his chair.

"The greatest book ever written, bar none," he said as he turned the leaves. "More cases at law have been won on Webster than on Blackstone, sir. Here we are; this is the meaning you have in mind when you ask me to enlarge on coincidence," he read in soft thunder: " 'an instance of coinciding, especially one apparently accidental, but which suggests a causal connection.' "

He closed the book with a sound reminiscent of that which his released lip had made, set it on the floor and brooded again.

"Coincidence is a pretty big word, Mr. Rapidan," he said, and Rapidan could fancy himself listening to a learned judge handing down an opinion which he meant to stand good during the ages. "And I've noticed in my time, the bigger the word, the less its meaning. This word means just exactly—nothing. Makes you think of 'electricity'; of 'gravitation.' Take gravitation; good example: When men buck up against a force like that, the greatest force in the universe, something they can't get the hang of, can't understand and can't explain, they nail a long tailed name to it, look smug and let it go at that. When folks know what they're talking about and don't have to hide a lot of ignorance, they use little words. . . . There's half my fee earned already," he laughed.

"Go ahead," said Rapidan.

"For the other half?" Barfoot plucked at his lip, drew it lingeringly out and let it snap back. "Let's go. We'll take an example. Two things happen, same time. A bit out of the ordinary, of course, or we wouldn't

think of tying the long tail word to 'em. You say to yourself, 'I'd give a hundred dollars for a burro with one black ear and one white one, and with three white feet and one black one.' Pretty soon along comes a man with a burro and it's got one black, one white ear and the three white feet. The man says, 'Want to buy him? I'll sell him for a hundred bones.' That's coincidence, ain't it?"

Rapidan merely waited for him to go on.

"I'll bring you back now to what I said on gravitation," continued Barfoot ponderously. "From that we hop again to Webster on coincidence: He's a sly old coot, he is! So was old Johnson, if you want to know; so's any man that's got the stuff in him dictionaries are made of! Old Webster sticks his tongue in his cheek and says to you: '*Seemingly* accidental!' He says on, 'Something that suggests a causal connection!' And now you've got it. What goes for coincidence is something that we can't get hold of any more than gravitation; we say such things just happen, because the causes lie out of our blind sight. There's always a reason, Mr. Rapidan—but we can't find it. You figured on your circus-burro and it came; you couldn't see any rhyme or reason in it so you called it coincidence. But there was a reason—and old man Webster knew it!—And now, if you're not getting a whale of a lot for your money, you can remember that five dollars isn't a whale of a big lump sum!"

Rapidan rose to go.

"How'd you happen to ask *me* a question like that?" Barfoot demanded.

"I was interested in your attitude toward luck," Rapidan told him carelessly. He stepped across the room and took up the old rifle idly, turning it curiously in

his hands. A very old weapon, certainly, the stock heavily and amateurishly carved.

He turned to Barfoot with a smile; the smile which illumined his face as though a sudden bright light were flooding it.

"I'll swap you a brand new, modern rifle for this," he said.

For an instant Barfoot's big hulking body grew tense. Somehow he suggested a monster cat about to spring. The lids drooped over his eyes.

"Tell us the story, Rapidan," he said jovially, relaxed as swiftly as he had grown rigid. "Coincidence—and old guns—"

For the first time Rapidan laughed. With him laughter was soft and low, scarcely audible, a series of quiet chuckling sounds as though he enjoyed his laughter too much to let it escape him; a rich inner glee with but faint audible manifestation.

"How about it?" he asked again. "Shall I take it along? I'll send you the new gun, a Savage, from my new ranch as soon as I'm settled there. Send it or bring it down myself."

"Got a collection of guns?"

"I have a few. How about it?"

Barfoot began whistling softly, musically. Then,

"Think I'm a crook, don't you?" he exclaimed suddenly.

"Why should I?"

"Formed the opinion before you ever saw me; from talking with Bill Smith. Haven't changed it since seeing me, either. Well, I've got the best of you so far, Mr. Rapidan. You only think I'm a crook; I know you are one."

Rapidan was turning the old rifle over in his hands.

"How about it?" he asked once more.

"Take it along," said Barfoot, "on one understanding. I'm to pick from among your other guns."

"Want me to bring 'em all down here?"

"I'll be up at your place; in a few days."

Rapidan nodded and went out.

CHAPTER V

THE hour was one of quiet. Nacional, that drowsed throughout the long hot day, had not yet bestirred in its usual nocturnal rowdyism. Rapidan, returning to the stable where he had left his horse, met few in the dusty road. The very air was heavy and listless, rich with the oily aromas of Mexican cookery.

Just inside the front doors of the big barn a dim lantern with smoky chimney appeared less an implement of illumination than a unique machine for making shadows. In the narrow field of its murky emanation the stable boy stretched at length on the bunk in a combination "office" and harness room, appeared no whit more substantially material than the grotesque black caricature of him sprawled on the wall. Dreaming awake? Sleeping, awake, rather. The sluggard of fig fame might have knelt before Manuel of Nacional. And Manuel would have taught him the credo of his kind: "The day was made to rest and the night was made to sleep."

"For nothing in the world would I disturb your placid serenity," said Rapidan softly in the soft Spanish. "Your money is here. Being already on my feet, it would be less effort for me, without doubt, to go get my own horse."

He went on, deeper into the big shadowy barn, leaving Manuel clasping the stable fee. There was a narrow back door standing ajar; at the rear Rapidan could see a low, dim star shining through it. It was at the manger near the back door that he himself had

stabled his horse. The animal heard his step and nickered softly.

"All right, Diamond," answered Rapidan. "Right away, old boy."

Charlie Krebs had made no mistake; Black Dynamite, a devil-horse, the big brute had been until Rapidan rode him and mastered him and, in the lull after the storm, made a friend of him. Rapidan, meditating that dynamite was of no earthly use save as an explosive, and being determined that the horse's explosive moments were to become fewer and fewer and farther between, renamed him. "Black Diamond" suggested itself, of course; and Rapidan, judging that he really had acquired a diamond in the rough and one that was due for a good bit of polishing, sought no further. ("Acquired" is the word; not "bought." There alone was Krebs in error. Rapidan had traded a pair of pack mules for Black Dynamite, having but recently come by the mules in an earlier trade.)

Rapidan moved on through the shadows, setting his course by the dimly visible opening of the back door. The still air was heavy with stable smells; the mustiness of old mangers, the acrid odor of much-used harnesses and saddles and saddle blankets, little puffs of sweet, clean fragrance shaken out of wisps of fresh hay, the familiar steam arising from the wet hide of a horse somewhere near at hand that had been hard ridden and left to dry naturally. No grooming here in Nacional; ride a horse, ride him hard, yank off saddle and bridle, turn him loose. Like Krebs.

So Rapidan always cared for his own animals. He had given Diamond his water and grain; had rubbed him down; had even removed the saddle since one never knew how long he might be detained. One never

knew just what was around the next corner; what might be rushing along to meet him on some undreamed of trail.

He groped his way along to Black Diamond's stall, circling about a wagon, stumbling over the shafts of a cart; here and there in the dark he could hear the strong jaws of horses grinding their grain, or the shifting and stamping of hoofs. His horse nosed him affectionately and took the bit with impatient eagerness. Rapidan saddled swiftly and, taking the reins in one hand, carrying the old rifle in the other, turned to lead the horse out through the low, narrow doorway.

He made out now, for the first time, that close to this door and just within the stable, another horse stood saddled and bridled; it was tethered to a big staple in the wall. He wondered idly, always interested in horses as individuals, what its master was about; if he had gone off somewhere, perhaps to be gone for hours, with no thought to his beast's comfort. There were plenty of men like that. A noble looking animal, too, he judged from the little detail which the dim light allowed. Rangy, high-headed, sensitive; looking as dark as Black Diamond himself in this light. Rapidan looked closer; a dark red-bay, perhaps. Two white fore-feet. He thought of Barfoot's theoretical burro and smiled.

Just then, when about to set foot across the threshold, he heard hastening steps somewhere outside. The steps grew louder, coming on almost at a run.

"So," thought Rapidan, with a sense of relief, "that explains the horse tied here. Some one in a hurry, having him all ready—"

A sudden flurry of mingled sounds burst upon him. The steps came flying on; the man was running now in

dead earnest. There were other rushing footsteps; breathless, inarticulate shouts. Rapidan looked out. He saw several forms, hardly more than vague, running blurs for though it was less dark out under the stars than here in the stable end, it was dark enough. One of them—he was a small man or looked small because in his running he doubled over—was making straight for the doorway in which Rapidan stood. The others seemed to spring up all about him; there were several of them. Certainly three or four; perhaps more—

Nothing was clearer—even to Rapidan—that here was no affair of his. Moreover he was something of a stickler to the belief that each man of us should hoe out his own row, and never mind what was done in his neighbor's potato patch. He had been known to remark that, "If there's anything in evolution the time will come when folks have noses long as elephants', from sticking them in other folks' business." And further, in his placid moments which were many, he had mused that "Most folk leave their breakfast dishes dirty in their rush to go dusting in corners and doing general housecleaning for their friends." Clearly his rôle now was that of idle if interested spectator.

A loud, harsh voice began roaring out savagely:

"Nail him! Nab him! Hammer him over the head! —Got him!"

And now here, all of a sudden, were two potent facts united to make Rapidan forget for the moment that he had no personal concern in all this. For one thing, they were at least three or four against one; no fairness in that. And then that rough voice; Rapidan with his own theories, one of which concerned men's voices, didn't like the voice and didn't like the

man. That decided him. Here was a free-for-all fight; and he leaped square into the midst of it.

He saw the fugitive go down, floundering and battling furiously, the others piling up on top of him. They were so near the door that one spring carried Rapidan into their midst. He caught one of the captors by the shoulder and flung him backward so that he crashed to the ground a dozen feet from the center of activities. He caught at a second man; this one came to his feet, slipping sideways out of Rapidan's grasp, and threw up his hand. Rapidan sensed rather than saw the weapon and struck out with the old rifle; its barrel beat the arm down, sent a revolver flying and whipped a howling curse from the arm's owner.

Another man sprang up; they were all shouting wildly now; there came quick flashes, sharp reports, the sinister whistle of bullets. And Rapidan, finding himself in the thick of a battle in dead earnest, without quite knowing how he came to be there, went to work with a will. With a will to be done with it and free of it and away; anywhere but here. He swung the old rifle, clubbed in both hands, like a flail. There was no standing up against a thing like that. There was no blood-lust in him; he didn't want to kill anybody. But he did want to live through the fracas himself. And there was just this one way to do it.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a man break free of the others and dart in at the stable door. There went the fellow whose fight he had taken up; going clear of the mess without stopping to make any pretty speeches. Well, perhaps he, too, was of a mind to see the sun come up tomorrow! Rapidan swung again, swept two men backward and out of his way, and leaped after the fugitive. He was just in time to see

him go up into a saddle like a cat up a tree. What saddle? The first at hand with a horse under it, of course! Like a shot he was off through the big barn, headed for the wide front doors and the open night beyond.

"Hi!" yelled Rapidan. "Hold on there!"

But even while he shouted he knew there'd be no heed paid him. There remained the other horse, the one this fellow had left here so conveniently. With a quick hard yank Rapidan jerked the rope free from the staple; as a man leaped toward him, shooting as he came, Rapidan swung to the horse's back and, stooping low, sped after the racing Black Diamond.

The thunder of hoofs filled the old barn; even Manuel of the border was not immune to such disturbances. But when he had his lantern in hand and came hurrying forth it was only to stare at two big horses rushing by him like black shadowy things caught up and borne along by a storm wind.

"*Mama mia!*" gasped Manuel.

"Hi there!" yelled Rapidan the second time. "You've got my horse!"

He had to laugh at himself a moment later, realizing the absurdity of his own words. What would the man on Black Diamond care whose horse he rode? He wanted speed, so much was obvious; he had it.

He had turned northward, toward the horseshoe hills above Nacional, the way being clear and open in that direction, hence inviting to one whose haste was merely to be anywhere except in Nacional just now. White puffs of dust, whipped up from the road, looked like clouds of smoke in the starlight. Rapidan headed straight after him.

The only pursuers were the volleyed shouts sent

after the two fugitives. It would take time to bring out other horses, saddle and follow. Presently the voices themselves were drowned out by the thudding of hoofs and the growing distance; with a rush Rapidan went up the gentle slope of the hills and down on the far side. Nacional with its straggling lights and its flurry of excitement was blotted out behind him.

Far ahead he made out a racing blur; now and then a pale glint shone briefly upon it, some bit of silver flashing a star. There went Black Diamond, putting his gallant soul into his present task; how the old boy could run! His master, racing after him, was proud of him. But, extinguishing the warm glow of pride, came surging anxiety. He touched his own new mount with his spurs; what chance had he to come up with Black Diamond? Go along the border a thousand miles, overlook never a single horse of the many that wore saddles, and where would you come upon one to match Black Diamond?

The animal which Rapidan had found at hand in his moment of need was a valiant fellow, strong and swift and gallant-hearted; he settled down to work with a fine ambitious frenzy. But as they swept along over the sandy track it became clearer at every bound that the day when he could overtake Black Diamond would be the same day when a horned toad ran down a road-runner.

So once again Rapidan shouted:

"Hold on!—change horses—"

The hills hereabouts were scarcely more than gentle billows of earth yet down in the hollows horse and rider disappeared fleetingly, only to pop up upon another crest. The distance between Black Diamond and the red-bay was steadily widening. There had been

scant vegetation until now, only low sage brush in black dots upon the gray earth covering. But ahead were taller shrubs, creosote bushes and mesquite, now and again in clumps, as tall as a man, some twice as tall. And the heavy soil muffled hoof beats. Rapidan began to fear that the rider in front of him might swerve in some hollow to right or left, might dip behind some clump of desert trees and vanish utterly.

He wondered if Black Diamond had yet realized that it was not his own master who bestrode him? He was not a horse for every man to ride! And then, just as he was about to call again, he had his inspiration. He shouted at the top of his lungs, but not to the fleeing rider. It was to the horse itself that he sent out his ringing voice:

"Diamond!—Play, boy!—Play!—Red hot, Diamond. *Red hot!*"

Black Diamond had been confused. Back there at the stable he had been saddled and petted by his master. His master had left him a moment and he had waited, knowing that presently they would be on their way. So he had awaited at the door. He had heard sounds to make him stir uneasily, flinging up his head and cocking his ears and fidgeting. Then, when he expected his master, a man had come flying toward him, had flung himself up into the saddle and reined him about. He had needed no prompting but was off at a run.—And still his confusion remained; the sounds of shots, the smell of powder excited him. He lost his head and simply ran away.

Then pursuing hoofs rang out behind him. Any horse will run harder when another horse would haul him in. He, like the two men, felt the hot urge to be

anywhere but here. When he heard Rapidan's voice, somewhere far behind, his confusion was but confounded and he ran the faster.

And now, here of a sudden, came that same voice shouting: "Play, boy! Play.—Red hot, Diamond. *Red hot!*"

When Rapidan and Black Diamond played together, there was a game worth any man's watching. At such times was the horse permitted to remember that there had been a time when his name was Black Dynamite. The command to play was the application of the match to the powder barrel. And "red hot" simply meant that Black Diamond, become again Black Dynamite, was expected to do his worst.

From a headlong run, with fore legs shot out in front of him, he slid through the loose soil to a dead stop. And from that momentary stop, in which his unprepared rider came close to shooting over his head, he went into sudden, purposeful, gyroscopic action. He had never done a prettier bit of bucking in all his life. Any man then who could have stuck to his back for thirty seconds could have boasted thereafter that he could "ride." His present rider, with no inkling of what was about to happen, had no better chance with him than has a dry leaf with a tornado. He was catapulted upward and forward; he went writhing and twisting through the air, looking to Rapidan who rode up the slope toward him, to be clutching wildly at the field of stars. And where he fell he lay a moment, groaning.

Black Diamond snorted, perhaps in disgust; the game had hardly been worth the playing. Then he waited, shaken by nervous tremors, for his master.

"You're a bird, you are," said Rapidan as the fallen man got shakily to his feet. "Running off with my horse after I'd put my oar in with you."

The other did not seem fully to understand; his attitude bespoke uncertainty. Well, he had been pretty thoroughly shaken; lucky for him that he hadn't finished this night's escapade with a broken neck.

Rapidan dismounted. As he came down he saw the other man's swift gesture; there was ample light diffused over the gray desert for him to interpret the movement though he could not be quite sure of the weapon drawn.

"Go slow there," said Rapidan. "Here's your horse. I want mine. And that's all I want of you."

He went straight to Black Diamond and up into the saddle, being of a mind to be on his way before those other fellows, back there in Nacional, forked their own horseflesh and swarmed out this way. He marked how the other man, standing uncertainly, grew suddenly active and went to his own horse. He hadn't spoken a single word; a fact curiously noticeable. He jerked his broad hat low over his eyes; a scarf about his neck was pulled high, his chin hidden in it. Rapidan studied him intently.

"Secretive jasper," he mused. "Wonder if I'd know him if we met again?"

He watched the man's walk; no two men, he knew, walked exactly the same. This man, he thought, limped a little; it was hard to be sure, what with night light and the sand giving under foot. He made what he could of the fellow's stature, girth, and way of mounting a horse. Then, with never a word, the man was gone, riding hard from the jump, headed into the barren lands in the north.

Rapidan began chuckling softly to himself.

"If I ever come across a deaf mute in these parts," he advised Black Diamond, turning him slightly to the left, in the general direction of the Honeycutt ranch, "I'll know him!"

CHAPTER VI

SHORTLY before arriving at the Honeycutt ranch headquarters—he had been steering toward a lighted window for miles—Rapidan saw some one riding toward him in evident wild haste. A moment later a figure shot by him without slacking speed, going on with a rush of wind, plying a riding quirt furiously, whipping it back and forth, back and forth like one gone mad. Rapidan's brows came down sharply; fool to treat a horse like that; fool and brute and worse than either. With probably a twenty mile ride ahead, for where but to Nacional—

He whistled wonderingly. It was one of the Honeycutt girls. She had seen him, she had had to swerve to pass him but, head down and head-long, she had not concerned herself with his identity.

He turned in the saddle to watch her. Where did she think she was going? Surely not all the way to Nacional, starting out at this pace! She'd kill the horse—

"Go 'long, Diamond," he commanded tersely. He had been loitering but now gave the horse its head. Of a sudden he was impatient to come to his camp.

Five minutes later, just as he was turning into the field below the house, he was aware of a second rider rushing toward him at the same breakneck pace. A second instance tonight of pursuer and pursued? It most certainly looked like it. The one coming now, in the way he rode, reminded Rapidan, save for size, of a gopher. Charlie Krebs undoubtedly. And pounding his horse along at every jump.

"Here I go interfering again," grunted Rapidan and strove to block the way, shouting: "Hi! What's up?"

Krebs, mouthing curses, tried to push by him, to ride him down, anything to avoid delay. But Rapidan, bound on having a word with him, leaned out and caught his bridle rein.

"Let go!" cried Krebs. "Let go, you!"

"Where's the fire?" drawled Rapidan. "Who wants the doctor? Or is it a tidal wave?"

"Let go, I tell you," fairly screamed Krebs and struck at his arm with his quirt.

Rapidan forestalled the blow by a sudden shift of his hand; and the hand went straight to Kreb's throat.

"Easy, little man. Sit still or I'll squeeze you until one or two of your eyes pop out. What are you chasing after that girl for?"

"I'm not chasing her," squealed Krebs. "She's played me a dirty trick; swiped the horse I'd saddled for me.—I got to beat her to Nacional, that's all."

Slowly Rapidan's fingers relaxed though he did not yet take them from the man's throat.

"Just a little twenty mile race, is it?" he remarked pleasantly. "Sure; nothing out of the everyday, after all."

"She's cheatin' me—she's tryin' to beat me out of some money. Let go, I tell you!"

"So that's it.—Well, run along, little rough rider. But if anything should happen to the girl, remember I'll swear you did it."

Charlie Krebs flung back some half choking and quite inarticulate retort and urged his horse again into a gallop. Rapidan did not tarry to watch him but rode on to his wagon. Only when he had rounded the cow-

barn and come within a hundred yards of the cottonwoods by the spring did he see the candle light gushing out through the half open door of his own gay little house.

He did not stop to unsaddle Black Diamond, but climbed the let-down steps and thrust the door wide.

"Hello," he said drily. "Here yet? Thought maybe you'd be on your way."

"I waited for you. I wanted a word with you after all."

Rapidan stood regarding him with keen, hard eyes; one would have said with some new interest. Certainly he had seen the man enough times, night and day, to know every feature.

He, too, had shaved this afternoon. That made a difference. He was younger than Rapidan had realized; not far up in the ladder of his twenties perhaps. He was still gaunt, dreadfully emaciated in fact, eyes unnaturally emphasized in the drawn expanse of his face and still holding the haunted look of one who had so recently gone so very far down among spectral shadows. Young and eager and reckless he had been some few short days ago; now he looked the wreck of youth and recklessness. The mark of the desert was still upon him and would remain for many a day.

"I started to hook it for parts unknown," he said bluntly as Rapidan came in. " 'Bout an hour ago. But I turned back. I wasn't going to drift along, taking a horse of yours, saying never a word. Not after the way you'd treated me, I wasn't! I—"

"Look here," said Rapidan, "I don't know who you are. And I won't know—unless you tell me—"

The young fellow jerked up his head and Rapidan read in the gesture that here had been a bold young

spur-jingler before the desert pulled him down, a passionate, defiant youngster of the hard-riding variety.

"Well, you're welcome to know," he rapped out. "I am—"

Rapidan threw up a hasty hand.

"Sh! Hold your horses, sonny. I don't want to know. That's what I'm getting at. You tell me nothing. And I'll do the telling. First rattle out of the box, here's this: I just met the Honeycutt hired man murdering horseflesh on his way to Nacional. That's one thing. Next, that man's no good; ab-so-lute-ly no earthly good. Next thing, there's a reward out for a man named Jim Terril. Thousand dollars. There's a notice tacked up on the barn over yonder. Next, I left a saddled horse here this evening, tied to the wagon wheel. It's there now. Listening, are you? Keep both hands over your own mouth and spread your ears, my son. I'm going to get started on my way inside fifteen minutes. If anybody comes whooping out this way looking for anybody, they can follow my wheel tracks which will lead 'em straight to Bill Smith's ranch, beyond Spanish Hacienda. And, again supposing that anybody should come poking around out this way, I judge we've got about five hours' start on 'em. —Got all that?"

The young fellow stood looking at him curiously. His eyes were very bright, like the eyes of a man in a fever. Suddenly a dash of tears came into them.

Rapidan spoke hastily:

"By the way: Write me a letter. Let me know where a letter or wire will pick you up. For that we'll need a name, won't we? Well, sonny, I'll lend you one of mine; I happen to have a string of them. When I sign myself, full and complete, it takes a sheet of foolscap.

You behold before you none other than—harken and heed—Julian Randolph Prentiss Worthington James Daniel Rapidan. I'll stake you to the first two names; sign yourself Julian Randolph. And make sure, sonny," he added with so rich a solemnity that he brought the first hint of a grin to the haunted eyes watching him, "that you so conduct yourself that those proud names remain unsullied in your keeping!—Now, there's a full canteen tied to the saddle, and there's a little package, since man needs to eat; and I'd better be hitching up my ponies."

The boy stepped down from the wagon. He stopped, seeming to hesitate, and looked up. Impulsively he put up his hand.

"So long, old timer," he said.

"Luck," said Rapidan. And added: "So long—Jim."

He withdrew into his little house and closed the door. Then he drew down the shades over his windows. If later any one should ask, "Which way did he go?" Rapidan could answer quite innocently, "Don't know." —That boy take an ax and murder a man? Then burn the shed down over him? "Rats!" said Rapidan.

He sat a little while looking about him. Everything was in order. The boy had neatly folded his blanket at the foot of the cot; he had cleaned and put away Rapidan's shaving materials. He had helped himself to cheese and coffee and had tidied up when he had done.

The interior of Rapidan's rolling home was spick-and-span and amazingly convenient. Above and below the windows were shelves, each with a guard-strip at the bottom to keep things from jolting off. There were shallow, built-in cupboards divided into compartments of varying sizes for their individual purposes. On one

side was the cot, hinged so as to lift and fit back against the wall when it was not required and its space was. A small stove stood on a high box; the box itself held the fuel. From the inverted valley along the roof-tree hung pendulously strings of bright red peppers, dried onions, pungently aromatic sage, lemons snared in a net and—since truth is not truth unless it be truth entire—the lowly, oft condemned yet delicious garlic.

The cupboards went always well stocked; the shelves had room for an imposing array of tins, boxes, paper parcels—and odds and ends. There was even a cubby-hole that housed books, four or five as decreed by their girth. At present there were three only: a Pliny the Elder; a modern detective story; a little volume on fishes, color-illustrated.—It has been said, "Show me what a man reads and I'll read you the man," or something to that effect. It might as well be said, "Show me what a horse eats and I'll tell you what the horse is." Race horses and plow horses get along nicely, thank you, on hay and oats. Rapidan read without availing himself of the philanthropic services of any set of invisible arbiters to cry: "Read this, brother, so nicely done up in paper for you; never mind what it is, it's just what you need. Drop that other thing! Horrors, it's rank poison; we haven't even read it ourselves." Rapidan's procedure in acquiring a book was a zestful one. His Pliny, his fish-book and his detective story had come into his possession in a second hand book shop in Yuma. With an amazingly innocent look upon his long face—he was on the verge of a trade, and the innocent look just came naturally at such times—he had offered for sale the four or five old volumes which he had brought in with him. He had spent a pleasant hour, had dipped into all imaginable kinds of

books, and in the end, entirely satisfied, had traded his old books for these old ones. In his Pliny the Elder and in his detective story he had found rare treasures. In his book of fishes he had found marvels.

Added to these many things about him which he used, there were many other things which he did not use. Due to them he had found himself cramped for space; a trailer had been added; when it overflowed, another trailer. Of late he had been meditating upon a third. There were those articles of all sorts, sizes and usages, which had made Benny Honeycutt so sure that here came a store. Churns, yes; also brooms, carpet sweepers and a sewing machine; hoes, spades and a pitchfork; spare harness, guns—he took down the rifle from the top of the gun rack and in its place put the old weapon with the carved stock which he had brought from Barfoot's room—and a swelling miscellany which would have made a pretty page in a second hand dealer's catalog. The single unique thing about Rapidan's assortment of "acquired" belongings was this: There was not an article among them all that had ever cost him so much as a single penny, nor did he count at any time upon realizing so much as a single penny from the disposal of any part of this accumulation.

"Flotsam and jetsam, come in on the Trade Wind," said Rapidan of all this, "in time to go out again on the Trades."

He was no man to thrill to the chink of money. But he did get a thrill and a good, pleasurable one, from "Just swapping."

Having allowed ample time for a man on horseback to make good his unobserved departure toward whatever point of the compass he elected, he went outside.

His movements became brisk and purposeful. He unsaddled Black Diamond and tethered him behind the second trailer, alongside the little jersey cow, stowing saddle and bridle and spurs away under the canvas cover. He filled his water tank at the spring. The white leghorns had gone to bed long ago in their row of boxes under the flower boxes; he found the bantam rooster, however, nodding on top of the bamboo pole that held up the chicken wire and put him away in his own sleeping quarters. He watered his horses—and did not forget to water his flowers. Then he harnessed and hitched up. A bit of adjustment was necessary; he would leave here driving five instead of six horses; he put Oliver Cromwell, a sturdy and dependable old sorrel into the single tree which had replaced the former double tree; pulled down on the lever which raised his poultry enclosure up to the roof; opened his doors wide to the night air, flipped up the window shades, and blew out his candle. Then, seated in the easy chair in his front doorway, his long legs comfortably stretched out upon his inconsiderable but adequate front porch, he threw off the brake and called out:

"Ready to go, little ponies! Creep into your collars and let's shake some of this Honeycutt dust off us. On our way to have a look at that new ranch of ours. If we like it we'll stay a while. If we don't find it suits us, we'll know what to do! Steady there, Oliver. Step into it, Lady Bird. You, too, Mr. Parker; I've got my eye on you, old party! Hi, Mary Jane! Hi, Pepper! All together—and the cool night trail!"

He tossed off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. (He had washed his hands thoroughly by the spring, using soap lavishly; for he had not forgotten the feel of Charlie Krebs' throat.) On a shelf, readily

ransacked at hand, were pipe and tobacco. He got the pleasant weed burning. Without getting up—never was there a little home more carefully and skilfully arranged! Never a cozier den for one of the genus bachelor!—he reached out, groping in the corner at his right. A low whirring noise resulted, a gentle scratching sound, and then an old phonograph poured forth into the serene night a Scotch bagpipe rendition of "The Campbells Are Coming."

The horses went forward at a good round trot. Rapidan looked out over the starlit world in rich content.

CHAPTER VII

"THEY say," mused Rapidan, "that a man can't have everything. All wrong! Look at me."

The stars that lighted his way looked down on him. Were they, by any chance, philosophically enclined, those of them in the front ranks must have flashed the intelligence to the others farther back: "Here's something worth watching. There goes a contented man."

The world itself was his just then. He could look far ahead, at times for many miles; far to right and to left; far behind were he of a mind to turn backward, which he was not; all his. The universe, too; all his. Ownership was less shared by his only companions, horses and cow, chickens and flowers, than augmented by them; they asked nothing but increased his possessions by adding themselves thereto. Croesus was never so rich, simply because Croesus' nose pointed down instead of up. Now, if some one had only said: "Show me the way a man points his nose and I'll tell you all about him!" there'd be some sense in that. Both Poe in his Noseology, and Cyrano in his lofty flight of fancy were standing on the very threshold of the knowledge of man!

Rapidan, being half asleep yet wide awake, that peculiar condition which a man may experience at such a moment, midnight in solitude, mused on:

"Can't eat your cake and have it, too, huh? That's another wisecrack that'll bear looking into. It's only when you eat your cake that it's really yours. Some jasper might snatch it away before you'd downed it;

not all the king's horses, after. Same thing as to say you can't stay at home and travel too. How about me?"

He sat in his own doorway and watched a new world open up before him. Everything came to his doorstep because he had had the simple forethought to set his house on wheels.

Pleasant voyaging, Mr. Rapidan. And a pleasant world to voyage through, take it all in all—which is exactly the way it was meant to be taken. Not gulped down like a pill, either; nibbled at, rather, tasted lingeringly. The mountain first and then the valley; the seashore and after it the desert. Not moving onward as the rabbit goes with the wolf after him, not yet as the wolf goes, chasing the rabbit. In a well ordered life there is no hurry about anything; an acorn doesn't hurry yet, given a chance, gets more accomplished than most men.

"Consider the turtle," meditated Rapidan. "If he finds the tax rate too high he moves his house into the next county."

His gay little house rocked along through the quiet hours and at a fairly lively pace. It was built for lightness as well as for compactness; aeroplanelike for both qualities as for strength. A lover of horses, he would as soon have thought of loading himself down with a back-breaking pack as of overtaxing his willing team; an experienced traveler, he knew that there were always ahead of him heavy roads and steep pulls, and kept them in mind from the outset. True, his possessions had grown since he first took the road; for overflow he had added one trailer, then another. But as he affixed these at the rear, he added pulling power at the front; he had begun with two horses and was not compelled to stop with six.

It was a ghostly white, dusty road that he followed tonight, leading largely through barren flats but now and again running along more fertile fields. Here was the very fringe of the desert, at intervals made rich with a broad hem of crop-growing and grazing lands. Arid miles ended at rare instances in little green valleys, cups among the hills where springs gushed up and grass grew and trees stood high against the sky so that they seemed for fruit to bear stars. But always, with such a little charm-spot left behind him, he had to do again with the dusty road and the tatters of the desert fringe.

In the sandy tracts where the road was but two dim parallel lines, his horses plodded slowly; with harder ground underfoot he put them to a lively trot. They crept up hill but they went with something of a rush down the long easy slopes. He estimated that he was making an average of five miles an hour. When he made his estimate he was thinking, not of the end of this lap of his journey nor of any particular time when he meant to achieve it, but of such as might be riding after him. The sheriff or a deputy from Nacional; perhaps a posse. Charlie Krebs, slavering for his blood-money; the Honeycutt girl, too, very likely, and also slavering.

"Roll along, little ponies," he sang out encouragingly. "Just remember we're not working for Charlie Krebs on this lay-out, not working for the hard-riding Honeycutt lady; so just roll along, little ponies, and let Judas and Delilah come up with us when they can."

When he had been on his way a full five hours—he had started at ten and it was now some minutes after three—he came among some low rocky hills and to a forking of the road. He stopped, not because of any

doubt which road to take, but to dwell upon a thought which had just suggested itself. He turned to look back; night was still brooding over the world, but across the gray levels behind him he would have been able to make out the moving figures of horsemen, were any drawing near. No one in sight yet. Too early to expect pursuit, he knew full well; yet one never knew. Krebs and the Honeycutt girl might have their own run of good luck, coming upon some deputy sheriff before going all the way into Nacional; even making up their own posse from some ranch. Possibilities, these, which a man might do well to bear in mind. The likelihood, however, was that just about now they were back at the Honeycutt ranch and discovering that their bird had taken to his wings.

"They'll follow the wagon tracks," Rapidan was prepared to wager. "The distance I've covered in five hours they'll eat up in two or two and a half."

He regarded the branching roads thoughtfully. The one bearing off to the left would lead him in some eight or ten miles to his new ranch, that which had been known as the Bill Smith place. The road, veering to the right, following a graded way along the hillside, would lead no doubt to the Spanish Hacienda.

"The trouble is," he decided, "that they'll stop here and look for tracks, to make sure. So go 'long, little ponies; take the Bill Smith road while I make us a pot of coffee. It's getting sort of cold, if you want to know. Of course it's all right with you rascals, churning along and getting your own glow out of a bit of exercise; but how about me?"

He guided his team into the left hand road, wrapped the loose reins about an iron hook at the side of his door, and took the necessary step back into his house's

interior to bring him to his stove. The horses went forward at a long-gaited walk, old Oliver Cromwell leading them on. Rapidan made his little fire, put on his coffee pot and was back in his chair before he had been missed. With subdued jingle and thud and creak his little world moved along through the starry solitude; the occasional interrogatory notes of an owl floated to him from the rocky hills and once and again some distant coyote gave utterance to his sharp yelp. In the little "air-tight" stove a piece of pitchy wood seethed and whistled; the coffee pot began to grow audible. Perhaps it thought that the pitch pine was a cricket, and now cleared its own throat to join in a Dickensian chant.

They went on for another mile or so. Rapidan had his coffee and his pipe thereafter. Warmed inwardly he jumped down and ran alongside his horses. And all the while he watched the road closely, seeking something. Simply a spot where, should a man turn out of the road, he'd not leave behind him such wheel-tracks as would be likely to be noticed by other men riding after him.

Here, along the base of a hill, the Bill Smith road, constituting a gap between decipherable tracks ahead and behind, was road in name and position only, hard, sunbaked, wind-blown soil and rubble scattered by the quarrying elements, over which the wagon rocked and jolted laboriously. And at the right, making this the very place for Rapidan's needs, a narrow rocky pass led into the hills.

"We'll turn out here, little ponies," said Rapidan promptly. "We'll find us a way into the hills, if we can't go over a mile. And there we'll camp—just for the fun of it. On your way, Oliver, and mind your step!

Hi, there, Mr. Parker! You, Lady! Come along, Mary Jane. Pep up, Pepper; and here we go!"

The way he had chosen presented difficulties but none that were insurmountable, none that greatly troubled driver and horses that were used to blazing their own trails. There were bowlders and washouts and a gully or two demanding respect; a good hard pull up into the saddle across the hill top and a steep pitch beyond to be taken straight down unless a man wanted to turn his wagon upside down. Nothing, however, to deter a man who had the whim to travel this way. Nor was there any great distance to go before conditions bettered themselves. Just over this single range of little hills lay a small, pleasant valley down into which drove Rapidan, highly satisfied.

"Wonder if my place is anything like this?" Rapidan pondered.

He turned down the valley, going slowly lest a horse step in a hole and come by a broken leg. He had no intention of going back the way he had come and so now headed toward that other road which had branched off toward, he supposed, the Spanish Hacienda place. He'd camp presently; tomorrow he'd turn back into the road he had abandoned for the hills.

"The blood-money-hounds will go whooping along to the Bill Smith place," he speculated pleasantly. "Then they'll head back, hunting tracks. That takes time and time's what we're playing for, Mr. Parker. What are you twisting your old head around this way for? Want to lie down and roll, maybe? It does look like a first class rolling-place. You, too, Oliver? Now suppose you boys straighten out and look the other way! There's a clump of likely looking cottonwoods ahead; I wouldn't be surprised from the look and the

smell of things if there's even a creek mosying down our little valley. Go 'long; I'll talk with you at the cottonwoods."

It was high time for a halt. The stars were paling, swifter and swifter, and a dim spectral hint of light lay along the hills in the east. Rapidan yawned and stretched luxuriously. Thereafter he craned his neck to find a certain bright particular star, an old friend in his wanderings.

"So long, Vega," he said gravely. "We've had another pretty fine night together, haven't we? See you again."

He cracked his whip and the horses trotted on along what appeared to be an old and little used road. Ten minutes later he slammed on his brake among the cottonwoods, enormous old fellows shutting out the stars. He heard the quiet murmur of water; his horses sniffed it. As he was stepping down the sudden, excited barking of a dog arrested him.

Then, for the first time, he saw the house. It was but a little distance away but had been hidden by the trees. He made it out distinctly now, an old ramshackle affair whose unpainted boards, silver-grayed by the weathering of years, gleamed with an almost metallic luster. For a moment he wondered if he had come straight on to Spanish Hacienda. But no, for two reasons: The Hacienda was at least half a dozen miles from the fork of the road; and, from what he had heard of it, had very little in common with such a dilapidated and dreary looking old shack as this one. Don Luis Alarcon, a fine old fashioned grandee, if rumor had him rightly catalogued, would be the one to house his dignified self in something of a feudal mansion; certainly not behind the leaning walls of a

shabby old frame house. Then, what place this? Rapidan had not heard of any other home hereabouts and was on the verge of suspecting that he had come by blundering chance to his own new ranch—the Bill Smith place.

"Well, Time tells everything she knows," decided Rapidan, and went about unhitching. He watered and groomed and fed his horses; now and then the dog barked but no one came out of the house, and the barkings gradually lost their belligerent quality and became purely perfunctory. The stars went dimmer and dimmer; the lesser ones slipped away from the broad fields of heaven, a few of the bolder, brighter ones remaining alone like valiant captains in armor covering the retreat of their glittering hosts as the standard bearers of the sun advanced beyond the hills. Daylight, even before the day's coming, was filling the higher sky.

Rapidan moved the lever which lowered his poultry farm. The white leghorns, as the imprisoning side of their row of boxes was converted into a convenient shelf, stepped forth, fluffing their feathers. The little bantam rooster, swiftest of them all and infinitely most important, flapped a pair of wings about the size of a big butterfly's, and sent forth his morning challenge. Rapidan laughed; he always laughed when Sir Clarion began his duties. What a crow that was! Shrill and sharp and quavering, and always just beyond the control of Sir Clarion himself, breaking or threatening to break, catching in his pigmy throat, exploding in thin bubbles of discordant sound.

"Thanks, old fellow," chuckled Rapidan. "You've started a new day for us in great shape."

He went from one to another of his poultry boxes with their individual roosts and their floor-coverings

of straw, and carried half a dozen fresh eggs with him to his stove. Breakfast preparations were the affair of a moment; buttered toast and jam, scrambled eggs with a dash of red-pepper and onion minced into the golden mess; hot coffee and cream which the Jersey cow had donated. After breakfast, since there was no sign of life, beside the dog's, at the house, he meant to have a sleep.

But as he was washing his breakfast dishes something suggested itself to him that stopped his quiet whistling, invoked a look of speculation into his eyes and ended with setting him chuckling. Might be lost effort, but the more he thought of it the more he liked the idea. So he went to the single-tree in which Oliver Cromwell had pulled all night, unhooked it and slipped it out of sight under the canvas covering of his rearmost trailer. In its place he put the double-tree which he customarily used and which he would have been using all night were it not that his team had diminished from six to five horses. Having done this simple task he returned to his dishes and to his interrupted soft whistling.

The dog broke into fresh staccato barking. In the distance Rapidan heard a horse galloping.

"Nap postponed," Rapidan decided. "Here come the blood-money-hounds."

It was broad day now, the disk of the sun thrusting up over the hills, that sweet, clean, freshening of the air stirring in the faint breeze which Rapidan always called "the smell of the sun." He went outside for his morning smoke and to see what was to be seen.

It was a single rider coming when he had looked for several. The horse was "set up" very prettily, sliding to a stop at the foot of the rickety steps; its rider

came down with a musical jingle and ran lightly up to the porch which creaked dismally underfoot. There came a sharp and prolonged rapping at the door; impatience in every blow. The dog growled, then began barking again, a cheerful and glad barking now; he had discovered a friend. But that friend had no time for him just now; the rapping continued, louder and more impatient than ever. And then a voice, as urgent as the knocking, rang out clearly through the morning stillness—and it was a girl's voice.

"Asleep, you two? The sun's 'way up in the sky—" Rapidan cocked an eye toward the east and saw that " 'way up" must mean about two inches above the horizon—"and you slug-a-beds haven't opened an eye! I might have known it. Tck! Am I to tolerate everything? *Valgame Dios!*"

"Whew!" ejaculated Rapidan. "What I thought was the morning breeze has turned into a cyclone!—But what a voice she has, what a voice!"

And it seemed to him then that this was a voice which he had long been waiting for, listening for. Never mind the words just now; they were quick and fast and rang with more than a hint of anger. It was the quality of the voice itself which first and chiefly concerned him. Foreign? He was not sure; there was more than a hint of the South in it. A Mexican girl? High-bred Mexican, then, be sure of that. Even the urgency of the early errand could not sharpen a single velvety note, but struck the syllables out musically, as though beaten from a little golden bell.

"She's fine-hair, whoever she is," said Rapidan. "Aristocracy. She—I know! She is—"

"Who's there?" called some one from within the house.

A woman's voice again, but Rapidan this time made a wry face. Entirely a feminine voice, but oh, what a difference in femininity itself. Make all allowances for one rudely awakened and still you had more than a full measure of the downright unpleasant. Acrimony? Perhaps not exactly. Tartness? Hardly that. Complaint? Assuredly; a voice like a whine.

And the girl's quick rejoinder, loud enough to carry clearly to where Rapidan stood, curt and emphatic, yet remained pleasant—cool—little bell notes struck out impatiently yet none the less golden.

"You should know, you two, who I am! It is Señorita Alarcon come to speak with you. Quickly, if you please."

"I knew," nodded Rapidan. "Of course. The little lady of the Spanish Hacienda.—If a very queenly queen should find herself obliged to say, 'Off with his head!', it would sound like that."

"Coming, Miss; coming right away," said yet another voice; a man's this time, foggy with sleep and oddly reminiscent of the woman's who had first answered the summons, querulous, more like a whine than a man's utterance. "We're just getting up, you know. Just a minute. We didn't get hardly any sleep last night."

"Uf!"

This from the Señorita Alarcon who stood on their porch, waiting after the fashion of one who does not relish waiting, whipping at her glossy, shining black boots.

Rapidan found himself wishing she would say something more. He liked listening to her.

CHAPTER VIII

RAPIDAN, having nothing else to do just now and no longer feeling disposed toward sleep, employed some of the early moments of the new daylight in looking about him interestedly. It did not take him long to make out that the dilapidated old shack of a house struck the key-note here in this little valley which might have been, and was not, made delectable. Poverty or neglect or incompetency had written large on all hands. Fences were down, the barn beyond the cottonwoods was tumbling, a young orchard planted behind the house was ragged and unpruned, with dry broken branches trailing disconsolately to the earth and many of the trees looked to be dying for lack of water. No chickens clucked in the weedy yard; no ducks marched down to the creek.—At the house windows that had broken panes were stuffed with rags. A pretty picture by dark; the domain of sloth by day. A place of neglected possibilities.

"Some poor old couple, too feeble to carry on," he fancied the twain of the unhappy voices.

The daughter of the house of Alarcon, still whipping away at her high, smart boots, forced for once at least to wait upon the pleasure of others, happened to glance in Rapidan's general direction. She swayed out to one side and for a little while her whip was still; evidently she had caught sight of his small caravan of which at the best, through the trees, she could have but broken glimpses. Of course she would have her own slight share of curiosity—"She must, with a voice like

that," said Rapidan, busy at creating a face from a voice, building up a personality to accord with the face —and would be wanting to know what sort of thing had arrived during the night. Presently he fancied that she shrugged; at any rate she turned her back and devoted herself exclusively to flicking the dust off her gallant looking boots.

"As top-lofty as Sir Clarion himself—"

A door opened, creaking noisily. Even the hinges here complained, and had whining voices.

"Sorry we kept you waiting; won't you come in now, Miss Allycoon—"

"Al-ar-con," the girl corrected the woman in the doorway. Rapidan who, like the Wedding Guest, could not choose but hear, also could not choose but chuckle. He wondered how many times before the woman had said "Allycoon," and had been set right in the matter?

"I can't ever quite seem to get the swing of foreign names," admitted the woman in a resigned and doleful voice. "But won't you step in?"

"I'll not step in, thank you," was the icy rejoinder. "And I wonder if there is anything on earth you two can 'quite seem to get the swing of'!"

"Well, I'm sure—"

"No, you're not sure, Agatha Bowen!" cried the girl. "You're not sure of anything. You never were. You—you—you two are a couple of worthless humbugs!"

Agatha Bowen gasped and said, "Well, I do declare!" Her consort made an appearance, putting on his coat as he did so, employing the interesting method of thrusting his arms into the sleeves, flinging the garment aloft above his head and then writhing into it

as it came down. His wife dodged and made room for him; Miss Alarcon withdrew a couple of paces. And, since she refused to go in, the three of them presently were grouped on the rickety porch.

"Marlborough Bowen," said his wife in a stunned sort of voice, "did you hear what Miss Allycoon just said?"

"Al-ar-con, if you please!"

Rapidan was having a very pleasant morning. His conscience should have pricked him; he should have said within himself that this was eavesdropping, the more reprehensible the more interesting it may be. But such a thing never entered his mind; he was even guilty of drawing half a dozen steps nearer, listening with all his ears. "Allycoon!" he repeated inwardly, and within himself added a little "Whee!" of delight.

Marlborough Bowen cleared his throat with a mild, "Ahem," and stood rubbing his eyes before adding anything to the conversation.

"She says we're no-good humbugs," Agatha Bowen wailed on. "She is come here to deprive from us the last thing remaining in our misfortunate existence, the very sanctity of our respectability and—"

"Uf!" cried the girl for the second time; a very eloquent little exclamation when spoken as she spoke it.

"I'm sure—" began Marlborough Bowen, either because here was something of a family formula or because in his sleepy-headed condition he had caught the words from his wife. And for answer he had, as she had had before him, an impatient denial:

"You're not sure. You two! You're not—not anything! If you had your deserts you'd just be—annihilated!" The final word came down like a rap across

the knuckles; she couldn't think at the moment of exactly what fate they did deserve.

"Off with their heads!" suggested Rapidan at his safe distance.

"When ever did mortal man, born of woman, get his just deserts?" debated Marlborough Bowen sadly. "We've had bad luck, I got to admit that. Things started bad for us and went worse. What we've got ahead, I don't know; pain, privation and—and—"

"Parsimony," suggested his wife.

"No, Agatha. Parsimony isn't the word I want.—My head isn't just right this morning, I'm afraid. I didn't sleep well and—"

"Your head," cried the girl, "never was right! Now you listen to me, you two, and when I'm done you'll know what I think of you. And when you know that, you'll know what to do. You'll take yourselves off this very day and you'll never come back. If you starve to death, I'll be glad of it. But crawl off Alarcon acres to do it. Listen to me!"

They listened, staring, their jaws dropping, a look of panic in their eyes. They were unhung rascals. They were hypocrites and they were thieves. The earth was a far fairer place without such as they. Their crimes were listed for them and made a goodly catalog. If they were good for anything, *anything,* pray what was it?—Last night, to top the great heap of offences, they had not shut off the water in Pipe Number One, and as a result of their flagrant dereliction of duty the great dam down at Spanish Hacienda had overflowed, the vegetable garden was under water and half washed out, the patio was a region of deep, sticky mud, Miss Alarcon's own sacred garden nook was inches deep, her flower beds ruined—her patience at an end.

The girl was breathing quickly from the accusations flung at them; they, looking woefully at each other, were for a while unable to lay their tongues to the right words and it was very still there in the little sunny valley. Of a sudden the silence was broken, but by none of the three on the porch. Galloping hoof beats again; several horses this time, sweeping down the valley along the tracks left by the eight wheels marking Rapidan's passing. Rapidan knew what sort of visitors he could expect and turned a grave and expressionless face toward them. If he experienced any secret satisfaction when he saw who two of them were he gave no sign of it; the hired man, Charlie Krebs, looked saddle-worn and weary, the Honeycutt girl positively haggard, wisps of honey-colored hair about her dust-grimed face, her lips white, her eyes feverish.

"Of course they'd want to be in at the death," mused Rapidan.

The man riding ten jumps ahead of the others was a hard-looking specimen with the badge of his authority gleaming upon his flapping vest; a man who carried the law into devious quarters in a pair of quick, lean, hard hands and, no less, in a pair of gray-blue, hard eyes; Sheriff Jesse Law of a county in which, to qualify for the sheriff's boots a man needed to be a hard specimen. He carried a rifle in his right hand and managed to convey the impression that he could use it as one did a revolver, swiftly and unerringly without troubling to call upon the left hand now tightening his horse's reins.

"Hey, you," he called out sharply. "You've given me a pretty chase, haven't you? What are you trying to do? Think you can hide a procession like this one you go dragging around with you?"

Rapidan was unhurried in his answer. Just now he was busy looking over the others in the sheriff's party; there were five of them altogether. One a little mahogany-tinted man, mahogany as to skin and hair and eyes and horseshoe mustache, scraggy and mild yet of certain fighting qualities to cause Sheriff Jesse Law, who knew men, to make him his deputy. And the remaining member of the quintette—was Barfoot! Now, just where did Barfoot fit in? Rapidan wanted to know. But there were Jesse Law's greeting and his questions, awaiting response.

"Given you a chase?" said Rapidan innocently. "How do you mean? Trying to hide? Who's trying to hide? Trying to hide what?"

Law eyed him up and down, down and up—through and through, Rapidan felt when the man had done. And in the end Law merely grunted. His eyes were now on the gay little house.

"I suppose he's in your campoody there?"

"Who?" Rapidan asked gravely.

"You don't know, eh? Strong on not knowing anything this morning, I suppose?—Terril, then."

"Terril? Who's Terril?"

Jesse Law regarded him curiously, yet all the while watched the wagon out of the corner of his eye.

"So you don't even know who Terril is?" he asked ironically.

Rapidan scratched his head and appeared to reflect. Then he looked up with that smile of his that was like the switching on of a strong light somewhere within him.

"I'll bet you mean Jim Terril? I saw reward signs tacked up for him. Supposed to have killed Bill Smith, isn't he? That's the man! And you're after him?" He

shook his head and concluded: "No, he's not along with me. Nobody is. I'm all by my lonely."

"He's a-lying to you!'" screamed the Honeycutt girl. "Don't listen to a thing he says, Mr. Law."

"Supposed to have killed Bill Smith?" said the sheriff. "No. All supposing is at an end, you know, when a jury brings in a verdict. So—"

He broke off abruptly. His hand went up to his hat and a glint of friendliness came into his eyes. Rapidan turned, looking where the sheriff looked, and saw Señorita Alarcon, followed by the two Bowens at a discreet distance, coming out from the house. The girl was already quite close and stopped as Law said genially:

"Morning, Miss Alarcon. Hope you won't throw me off for trespassing. Morning, Mrs. Bowen. Morning, Bowen."

Rapidan, looking straight into the girl's eyes, uncovered himself swiftly, somehow emphatically. Yes, glory-be, she was just the girl to go with that golden-bell voice of hers. Ravishing; she ravished a man's sober reason from its throne that only admiration might reign there. Spanish-American; the soft, still, tender beauty of Spain, the piquant, thrilling beauty of the West. Eyes Spanish in shape and depth and baffling provocation, Western in dove-gray coloring, in brilliance, in quick alertness. Her birthrights were an almost incomparable loveliness—and pride. Her bared, curly head—her hat with her gauntlets and whip was caught in one hand—was held erect, a little tipped to one side; her red mouth was unsmiling; she bore herself with that faint tinge of arrogance which one wondered if she ever put quite aside, even when she slept.

Western and Spanish; Spanish pride and Western freedom.

She turned swiftly toward Rapidan. His eyes drew her eyes and, for a breathless moment, held them fast. Of a sudden her clear, sun-goldened skin flushed red.

"Impertinent!" she cried hotly.

He had looked at her, that was all. But it was with that look on his face that always came there when Rapidan gazed upon rare beauty and surrendered himself to it and forgot himself in it. She would have surprised a look like that on his face had she come upon him while he was watching some glorious "sun-burst," Rapidan's name for those tremendous sunrises when the sun came sweeping up in flaming red barbaric magnificence; or if she had seen him come upon the open sea after long inland months; or, sometimes, when he communed with his star, Vega, "that dartles the red and the blue." Enrapt, lifted out of himself, oblivious at the moment of things which did not matter, he concerned himself alone with that which stirred him,—as wholeheartedly as a little boy seeing his first circus, the final word in concentration. He simply "let himself go," so to speak.

Now the cat may look at a queen, as has ofttimes been most truly said, but if he be a wise cat he will guard his expression; he may get himself set down as a presumptuous cat, not because of his admiration which is not only expected but exacted, but rather because of the extravagant expression thereof. As if what he thought of royalty mattered. His adulation should properly shine forth so timidly that it would be an easy matter to appear to ignore it; it should be as though Sir Cat, humble in his corner, should murmur

deferentially: "I must hide mine eyes that they, the mere eyes of a cat, do not offend with their over-great marvelling—for who am I but a most humble rat-catcher."

Sheriff Jesse Law, who had received no response to his cherry "Good morning," became businesslike again.

"If you don't mind," he said to Rapidan. "I'll look around a bit."

"Help yourself," said Rapidan quietly. "If you don't care to take my word that Terril isn't with me."

Law spurred by him, riding close—and watchfully—to the wagon, the little mahogany-colored man following at his horse's heels while the others looked on expectantly. The sheriff dismounted and went up into the little house. It should have taken him perhaps two minutes to assure himself that no one was hidden here; yet he was perhaps six or eight minutes making whatever investigations he had in mind. Meanwhile his deputy had thrown off the canvas covers of the two trailers.

"You'll answer a few questions, I take it?" said Law at the end of his search.

Barfoot who had said never a word but had been keenly intent upon everything that had happened, appeared now about to speak and thrust himself forward. But he closed his mouth again without saying a word. Rapidan, answering the sheriff, nodded.

"Krebs says you're Rapidan, the man that rode Black Dynamite a couple of years ago?"

Another nod.

"What are you doing in this part of the country?"

"Moving along, sheriff. Going up to my new ranch."

"The old Bill Smith place?"

Another nod.

"What do you know about Bill Smith?"

"Very little. Might say, virtually nothing. Had hay-fever pretty bad. Sneezed more than any man I ever knew—"

"You knew he was murdered?"

Rapidan nodded.

"Barfoot told me. Yesterday."

"What do you know of Jim Terril?"

"Not much. Less, I'd say, than I do of Bill Smith."

"Yet you had him along with you!"

"Did I?"

"Don't deny it, do you?"

Barfoot suddenly cleared his throat, opened his mouth—and fell silent. Silent but very watchful.

"No," said Rapidan.

"Tell me what you do know about him," said Law.

"About Jim Terril? Or about the man I had with me?"

"Since they're the same man— Well, about the man with you."

"I found him lost in the desert, nearly dead from thirst, starvation and exposure. I took care of him for three days. That's all."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know."

"You know at least when he left you?"

Rapidan nodded.

"When, then," snapped Law.

"Last night. About nine or ten o'clock."

"What!—That would mean he quit you back at Honeycutt's?"

A nod from Rapidan. A very thoughtful sheriff began rolling a cigarette. Presently he said curtly:

"So you're throwing in with Terril are you?"

Barfoot now broke in:

"You know, Mr. Rapidan, if you care to retain a lawyer—"

"What for?" queried Rapidan sharply.

"I asked you a question, Rapidan," Law reminded him.

But Barfoot, heedless of a glare turned on him, said hurriedly:

"A man don't have to answer questions! He can call for counsel!"

"So that's it, eh?" laughed Law. "That's why you stuck along, Barfoot? Hunting down a client, seeing that times were dull! Well, go slow, old party, or I'll clap you under arrest for interfering with an officer in pursuit of his duty. Now, Rapidan?"

"Just what do you mean, Sheriff, by my throwing in with him?"

"You connived at his escape; that's what I mean."

Rapidan was silent.

"Well, didn't you?"

A shrug this time. And then a counter question:

"How did I know who he was? Nobody told me. What right had I to hold him? What interest in holding him?"

"You're glad to see him go free just the same."

"I liked him. If there's trouble ahead of the kid, I'm glad that he's dodging some of it."

"Even though he's a murderer?"

Rapidan bestowed upon him a long cool glance.

"Don't believe it. Not for a minute. If the man I had with me was Jim Terril, you've got him wrong."

"He had his trial and was convicted."

"Men before him have swung off for other men's crimes. You know that."

Law laughed again.

"Suppose I pull you for your share in getting him away?"

"It would be a fool thing to do," Rapidan returned pleasantly. "That's something else you know as well as I do."

"Better hire a lawyer," said Barfoot. "I'll take your case, Rapidan."

"Thanks. I'll think it over. Wait until I see if I need legal help."

The mahogany-colored deputy, who all the while had been nosing about, looking at the horses, the wagon, even the poultry yard before which he stood lost in admiration, now beckoned his chief to where he stood—near one of the trailers. Law stepped to him, knowing that the deputy had come upon something of interest.

"What is it, Tipton?"

Tipton explained, but his rasping voice, lowered almost to a whisper, conveyed no intelligence beyond the sheriff's ears. Rapidan watched them interestedly. When Tipton drew the sheriff off with him, first to where the horses stood, then back by the wagon pole, Rapidan chuckled in his quiet way. In a moment Law returned, a new brightness in his eyes.

"You say that Terril left you at Honeycutt's?" he demanded.

"I said that the last I saw of the man with me was at Honeycutt's."

"He didn't take a Honeycutt horse. You let him have one of yours?"

"One of mine was missing when I started from there."

"You put your saddle horse in its place?"

"No. Black Diamond's never been in harness in his life. Most likely he'd tear things to pieces."

"Then you made out with five horses?"

Rapidan nodded and looked mirthful.

"How'd you manage, working your lead in a double-tree?"

"I used a single-tree," smiled Rapidan.

"Where is it now?"

"In the trailer back there. Your deputy must have seen it."

"And then, after getting here, you changed back to the double-tree?"

Another nod.

Jesse Law's eyes narrowed and grew harder and harder.

"Why? What was the idea?"

"The notion just struck me; that's all. Just for fun, I'd say."

Barfoot began to smile all over his large face. "What a witness, what a witness!"

Aloud he exclaimed:

"Better retain me; I'll take your case for fifty dollars—"

"Shut up, Barfoot!" said Law angrily. "Hear me? I said *shut up!* Now, Rapidan, you listen to me: You're getting yourself in bad about as fast as any man I ever met. You've helped Jim Terril to skip out, staking him to a horse—*maybe!*—and—"

"If a man takes one of my horses and rides off with it, am I responsible?" asked Rapidan gravely.

"And you've gone out of your way to hide your

wagon tracks from me, turning out of the road through the rocks—"

"It was getting time to make camp," Rapidan reminded him.

"Why not go on to the Bill Smith place? Why not camp by the road anywhere? You've got water along."

When a shrug could take the place of a spoken answer the sheriff might be reasonably sure of provoking one.

"If I took you along with me," said Law thoughtfully, "a few days in the cooler might make you come clean."

"Might," agreed Rapidan. "Might not. I'm not what you'd call a chatty party, you know. Besides, you haven't any charge to bring against me that would hold me.—Fifty dollars, you said, didn't you, Barfoot?"

"You bet!" cried Barfoot. "It's a cinch!"

"Hm," said the sheriff. "A cinch? No charge, eh? —By the way, Rapidan," he rapped out, "where were you last night? Before you started out this way?"

"Nacional."

"What for?"

"Business. With Barfoot, there."

"And when you left Barfoot?"

"Back to my outfit, at Honeycutt's."

"Stopped in at the stable to get your horse, didn't you?"

It was time for one of Rapidan's curt nods. And for him to ask himself swiftly just what was coming.

"What happened at the stable? While you were there?"

So Law knew about that, too. Rapidan eyed him thoughtfully.

"Well?" snapped Law. "Can't you answer straight-off? Got to think up what to say?"

"I was just wondering how you knew; that's all."

"Why in h—blazes shouldn't I know? Wasn't I there?"

Rapidan whistled softly. And then shot back his own question:

"Then why ask me?"

"Will you answer?"

"Yes. I was in the back of the stable. Had just saddled my horse and was about to be on my way when I heard a ruction out back. I stepped to the door and—Hm."

Maybe he had better retain Barfoot! He had not counted on this matter inserting itself. So the sheriff himself was there? Doing what? What part was he playing, unless—

"You were about to make an arrest?" said Rapidan swiftly. "You had trapped your man outside, back of the stable—*and he got away!*"

"And you never guessed it until this very minute, I suppose," grunted Law.

"No. I didn't guess. Not until this very minute." And he allowed himself the luxury of a second soft whistle.

"Go ahead," Law urged him. "Tell me what you know. Let's have this straight—if you can manage it."

And now Rapidan saw very clearly that his situation might have another than a merely humorous side. He had jumped square into the middle of another's man's fight last night, and without a doubt that man was some individual whom the sheriff was taking into camp. He had used a rifle, club fashion, and had bowled over at least two men. And, fool that he was, choice idiot

to lead the procession of elephantine noses, he had set free whatever culprit it was that had run afoul of the law.

All this flashed through his head and had its sobering effect. His customary gravity merely appeared a shade deeper as he answered Law. Never had he spoken more drawlingly; he needed to think fast and drag out the words. A man of very excellent imagination, he pictured vividly the likely interior of the jail down at Nacional.

"I was in the barn, at the back end. It was pretty dark; the stable boy had a smoky lamp up forward but it didn't help much where I was. I got to my horse, though, and got him saddled all right. Then the row started just outside. Sounded like a party staged to beat some guy up. I listened a minute, wondering about it. They were just outside the back door by then. You see, I didn't know what it was all about; I took it for just a common, everyday sort of a border row. Hadn't any idea you were mixed in it, sheriff, or that it was an affair of the law."

"Sure not," laughed Law ironically. "Go ahead."

"All of a sudden," Rapidan went on gravely, "another man took a hand in the fracas. And—"

"A man about your size, wasn't he, Rapidan?" said Law sharply.

Rapidan appeared to reflect. And he did reflect—swiftly.

"I'd say he was, sheriff," he answered at last. "Just about my size. It was pretty dark in there, as I've told you. Well, this man—he must have been standing real close to where I stood!—rushes out through the door and there's a pretty hot how-de-do for a spell. You'd know that part of it?—Then one of the men, maybe

the one you were trying to take in tow, sees his chance and streaks into the barn. He gets aboard a horse before you could say scat, and is off and away. Somebody outside gets reckless, spraying lead around; I see this is no place for a quiet man; I fork saddle-leather myself—and it's good night to Nacional."

The sheriff had listened with straining intentness to every word. So had the deputy, Tipton. So had Barfoot. And so, for that matter, had the others.

"And you," cried Law, looking about to spring on him, "you, the man that has got Jim Terril out of my reach are the man that butted in last night in Nacional! You're the man that blocked me just as I was about to rake in another murdering hound! You—"

Rapidan lifted his eyebrows as high as eyebrows could go and stared back at him coolly.

"Just how do you make that out?" he asked gently.

Law glanced at Tipton and smiled grimly. Then he bestowed a keen examining glance again upon Rapidan, seeming strangely concerned with his legs! Rapidan looked down, wondering what drew that look.

"Look inside his campoody, Tipton," Law commanded. "Hanging right by the side of the door."

Tipton nodded and vanished in the gay little house. A vague uneasiness descended upon Rapidan. There was something in the air that he couldn't grasp. Why had Law looked at him that way, seeming interested exclusively with his legs? And what would Tipton find inside—hanging at the side of the door?

Tipton thrust his head out to announce:

"You're right, Jesse. Shows up a mile. Same thing."

"Fine," said Law genially. And, turning back to Rapidan, he said with the same jovial satisfaction: "So, Rapidan, if I can't take you in for one job, I can

for another! Yes; you're right about having to pass you up as far as anything definite in the matter of standing in with Terril. I could put my rope on you, but old Barfoot here would have it off in two shakes—and would have the laugh on me, eh, Barfoot? But this other thing—I've got you there, dead to rights!"

"Put a name to it then," said Rapidan crisply.

"You're the man that butted in last night in Nacional."

"Sounds interesting. I'd be more interested in knowing how you think you can prove a thing like that. Or at least, perhaps you'd not mind saying why you think that I was mixed in that scrimmage in Nacional?"

"Hear the boy!" said Law and laughed good humoredly. "I shot a bit wild maybe last night; small wonder, with some big stiff whanging me over the head with a flagpole! But I had the hunch, even then, that I potted one bird!—Say, limp any off your left leg?"

Mystified, Rapidan only shook his head.

"Hadn't noticed," he said drily.

"Bring 'em along, Tip," said Law.

Tipton brought Rapidan's black chaps. Rapidan's brows shot up quizzically.

"Blood on 'em?" he queried drily.

"You guessed it," retorted Law. "We found blood first on your saddle; sweat leather and stirrup. Left side. Blood on the left side of your chaps. See?"

"I see," said Rapidan. "Yes, I see. And now all you've got to do is find a bullet hole somewhere in my left leg and—bingo! you pop me into the pen!"

"Look out for 'em, Rapidan," cried Barfoot eagerly. "You don't have to strip for 'em! You want a lawyer, quick! Me, I'm your man."

"He'll need about ten lawyers like you, Barfoot," snorted Law.

Once more Rapidan was thinking swiftly. And not altogether of himself this time. Of that other man who had ridden his horse from the Nacional stable; who had vanished without a word. A man who, no doubt, would be limping today, "favoring" his left leg.

Suddenly he looked up at Jesse Law, and that glorifying grin of his softened all the harsh lines of his face.

"I'll make you a sporting proposition, Sheriff," he offered brightly. "Step with me into my house. We'll take a look-see if I've got a hole in the leg. If I have, I go along with you—and don't even retain a lawyer. If I haven't—you apologize and skip along. What say?"

Law regarded him shrewdly, wondering what the man was up to now. And Rapidan, chuckling softly, turned and led the way toward his wagon—and limped slightly as he did so. Later, when he thought it over, he rather prided himself on that limp. Just a suggestion; so slight a limp that one would scarcely have noticed it at another time. But now all eyes were on him and it was a sufficiently obvious limp.

"Done!" cried Law. "Come ahead, Tip. Keep an eye on this bird. He's got something up his sleeve."

"Up my trousers leg you mean, don't you?" chuckled Rapidan.

Barfoot would have surged along with them but was waved back by little Tipton. The three men, the sheriff first, Rapidan next and Tipton bringing up the rear, stepped up into the little house and Tipton closed the door after them. Rapidan, before two pair of

bright, hard eyes exposed a muscular pair of legs—intact. Never a wound of any sort.

"All right," said Law heavily. He turned his back and started out. Then he snapped: "Why the limp, my son?"

"Like changing the single-tree," chuckled Rapidan. "Just for fun."

"All right, all right. Have your giggle, brother—while you can. Come ahead, Tipton. We've got Terril to run down yet."

"Forgot something, didn't you?" called Rapidan after him.

Law looked puzzled—then swore.

"All right, all right. I apologize," he snorted and went to his horse.

A moment later Rapidan came down from the wagon. And now came his own turn to gasp—inwardly. Outwardly he remained unconcerned, but only with a conscious effort.

Señorita Alarcon stood at her horse's side, as though about to mount. He had not noted the horse before; there had been so much else to occupy him. It was a tall, rangy dark red-bay. Suggesting Barfoot's fictitious burro, it had two white forefeet. If it wasn't the horse Rapidan had ridden out of the Nacional stable last night—well, then, he had no eye for horses!

CHAPTER IX

BARFOOT came spurring up to say, his voice confidentially lowered:

"Look here, Rapidan; you had one of two things in mind when you helped Jim Terril skip along: Either you're playing in with him for some reason and mean him to get clean away—or you intend to be the one who hands him over when you get ready, and cops off the reward."

Rapidan listened interestedly until he had finished; then his eyes went back to the red-bay with the white forefeet. About half past seven or eight o'clock last night that horse had been at Nacional. A good thirty miles from here. It could have got back to this little valley—or to Spanish Hacienda, half a dozen miles further on,—by, say, eleven o'clock. Anywhere, in fact, from half past ten to midnight. It showed no signs now of having been ridden hard.

"Just who was the man that gave the sheriff all that trouble at the Nacional stable?" he asked abruptly.

"I'll answer your question the same way you answer mine," said Barfoot. "If you'd sent a brass band on ahead of you to serenade Jesse Law and tell him you were coming, you couldn't have made it much clearer to him. If you want to finish the job in the same fine style you've begun it, why, then, just step out and kill a couple of men, stack 'em on the threshold of the jail door and leave your card with 'em!"

"Thanks. Now tell me, who was the man that got away from Law last night in Nacional?"

"You haven't any idea, I suppose?" jeered Barfoot.

"I'm asking you."

"Well then," and Barfoot, plainly mystified, looked at him in the frankest curiosity, "it was a gent that held up the paymaster and guard that were taking the pay-day cash down to the Esperanza Mine; the gent that gored the two of them and rode off with the swag —and if you happen to forget about it again, ask me the next time I see you and I'll tell the tale over for you."

"Both men killed?" queried Rapidan.

"Couldn't say," returned Barfoot, unconcerned. "They were pretty sick hombres last night; whether the angels have got 'em yet or not, I don't know."

"Wait a minute." He turned back into his little house to get the new rifle which he had promised Barfoot in exchange for the old one; might as well complete the trade now. He was glad to think of it; thus he would deprive the "shyster" of the obvious excuse of looking him up again. He stepped to the gun rack and stood before it a moment, seeming deep in thought. It was merely that the old rifle he had put here was not quite as he had left it. Some one had taken it down; no doubt had inspected it; again no doubt had put it back hastily. At any rate he had turned it end-for-end; Rapidan had left it with the muzzle pointing forward; it was now reversed.

Jesse Law, of course; or little Tipton. So it had caught the sheriff's, or the deputy's eye, had it? Hm.

He took down the new rifle he had promised in exchange for this one and returned to Barfoot. But Barfoot had his own ideas on the subject; he wheeled his horse and rode off to rejoin the sheriff, waving the

gun away and calling out that he didn't want to be bothered lugging it this morning; he'd call for it some other time.

Rapidan saw how Jesse Law stopped for a few words with Miss Alarcon, and how the girl had little to say and appeared scarcely to be listening to him. Presently Law rode away, Tipton and Barfoot with him. Krebs and the Honeycutt girl, though they had kept noticeably apart all this while, each ignoring the other save for an occasional glare, now appeared to have a thought in common. They had ridden some twenty miles further than the others, doubling the distance between the Honeycutt ranch and Nacional, and that meant a seventy mile jaunt for them. They looked jaded and disgruntled; they rode up to Miss Alarcon and Rapidan understood that they were saying they would rest up here a while. Then how the girl blazed out at them!

They were to do nothing of the kind! The shadows that they cast soiled Alarcon land. They had best move along and in haste. Let them turn back toward the road; there was a spring about five miles on, and shade.

"Whew, she's a nice, active little volcano this morning," mused Rapidan, and was not altogether displeased that his blood-money-hounds be sped along their way. Rather served that sort of gentry right, when you think it over.

They went—not together—Krebs muttering, the Honeycutt girl shrilling abuse. But they went.

Rapidan came down from his wagon and, hat in hand, went to where the girl stood by her horse.

"I didn't know I was trespassing when I pulled up under the cottonwoods," he remarked pleasantly. "It

was dark, you know. Am I to step along, too? Like those two?"

"Those two! *Uf!*"

It was the Spanish *"Uf!"* Pretty nearly "Oof!" in English phonetics. It meant that those two wearied her beyond endurance; they sickened her; she would breathe freely only when the range of hills shut them out; let them be gone, let them be forgotten; let her recover from the burdensome pain of the very thought of them.

At last she mounted, swinging up easily, gracefully. The two Bowens, Agatha and Marlborough, withdrawing dejectedly paused hesitantly to look back at her. Her eyes passed them by and came to rest, very cool and very impersonal, on Rapidan.

"Who are you?" she asked, managing a touch of arrogance in the simple question.

"A stranger in these parts," he advised her lightly. "Name of Rapidan. But since names don't count—"

"Names do count!" she flashed out at him. "Nothing has more weight—or less. I am Vega Alarcon!"

Vega—the name of his star! (Also, quite incidentally for Rapidan, the name of a very old and very famous Spanish family.) How she spoke the two names —Vega Alarcon.

"When I first saw you," said Rapidan, his gravity profound, his drawl accentuated, "I thought you must be the Young Queen of Spain. Traveling incognita, you know—and not very incognita at that! Like the Prince of Wales when, knocking about, he says, 'Oh, just call me Renfrew—' "

"Tck!" said Vega Alarcon. And, undoubtedly, would have ridden away with no more ado were it not that something which may rise superior even to tall pride,

held her. Curiosity. So she tarried to add, though the while she must tap at her stirrup with her whip and so set her horse dancing:

"Yes, you are trespassing. You ask, shall I send you away? It would be best if you told me more of yourself, what you do here and—and some other things, Mr. Rapidan."

"The postscript embodies the soul of the letter," said Rapidan. "These other things, Miss—" —he was tempted and fell—"Miss Allycoon."

Yes, she did it! Had the horses been running away, had the automobile been plunging over the cliff, had the aeroplane been falling, she must have taken the time for the correction: "Al-ar-con."

So soberly did he repeat it after her that she looked at him a bit suspiciously. If he *dared* make fun of her!

"First," she said stiffly, "did you have a hand in the escape of Jimmie Terril?"

It was a delight to listen to her utterance, such liquid notes did she make of the harshest of Anglo Saxon sounds; she had almost said—one can but approximate Vega Alarcon's speech—"Mees-ter Rah-pee-than." In speaking of Terril she had not, perhaps, said "Jeemie," but you may be sure she did not exactly say "Jimmie." The only trouble was that one, as Rapidan, ran the risk of attending so exclusively to the music of her voice as to ignore the actual content of the words themselves.—With a little start, realizing that whereas she had concluded her question he was waiting for her to go on serenading his ears, he answered:

"It would appear that I did have a hand in allowing some one whose name may have been Jim Terril to go on his way undeterred."

"That's a long way around to say—nothing at all,"

she said with a touch of impatience. "I like to have a thing said in as few words as possible. A yes or a no would have answered my question, and more clearly."

"Now, as for me," he responded in what may have passed for a burst of confidence, "I could listen entranced if certain people I know would take a thousand words to say 'Good morning.' "

"Did you help Jimmie Terril? Did you give him a horse so that he could escape?"

"I'd like to oblige you with brevity, but if you're interested you'll have to listen to the whole story. Go ahead? All right. Three or four days ago I picked a man up in the desert, the other side of Indian Palms. He was in pretty bad shape for want of water; clean off his head and half dead. I didn't bother about his name; neither did he. I simply brought him along as far as Honeycutt's. And there I saw the first reward sign, mentioning Jim Terril and describing him. A little while later I saw two of the Honeycutt outfit, those two you just sent on their way, streaking for Nacional, each trying to get there first. I had a horse saddled and tied to my wagon wheel. I went inside my castle, dropped the portcullis and didn't look out. I had told the man with me about the two people whooping on their way to Nacional. When I did look out, after a while, he had actually taken my horse and gone, and, by the way, he never told me his name. He did start to, but I remember I didn't let him finish. And there you are."

Her eyes brightened with his recital.

"You wouldn't save a poor fellow from death in the desert," she said softly, "only to hand him over to the hangman later."

"You're glad to have him go free?"

"For the part you took in that, Mr. Rapidan, I should say that you are welcome on the Alarcon ranches and that there must be no talk of trespassing. But now," and the smile which had flashed out upon him was suddenly darkened and blotted out by her frown, "we come to another matter. Last night near Nacional there was a robbery; two men were shot down and may die. And you—it would seem that you had some part to play in that affair, also? That you helped the robber to get away? Is that true?"

"Now, look here," he expostulated good humoredly, "you're asking a lot of questions! You'll be wanting to know all about me, what and where and why—"

"I should want to know about any stranger—trespassing on my father's land," she said curtly.

He nodded slowly; he appeared deep in reflection, eyes down while her own, for the first time not under surveillance, were frankly busy taking him in. In the end he sighed and shook his head and sighed again. And now when he looked up she thought that his eyes had in them an expression of sadness, of wistfulness—or was it contrition?

"You're right. I understand. You'd want to know what kind of a man it was; that's natural. Well, Miss Allycoon—"

"Al-ar-con!" she jerked him up.

"Yes. Miss— Maybe I'd better call you just—Vega?" he suggested mildly. "It's a real nice name and—"

"No! To you, if I find cause to address you, I am Miss Alarcon. And you were going to say—"

"You are wanting to protect your father's interests, and your own, I can see that. You don't like to throw me off the ranch, and yet one in your position must

make sure. Well," and he relieved himself of another amazing sigh, "I'm not much of an asset, I reckon; but I hope I'm not what you're afraid of: a trouble-breeder. I won't say I haven't been in trouble a time or two in my life; most of us poor fellows, you know, knocking around among the lower classes do at times get in with bad companions. And then, I'm afraid, we sometimes do things we're not quite proud of. I did have a fight lately; I won't say that's why I moved along to another place—but I did step along just after it happened. It—it— You see, I thumbed a man," he blurted out, as if to have the worst of it over with.

"Thumbed?" she repeated after him.

"When you thumb a man," he explained, with the final sigh, "you grab him by the face. You get your thumbs just underneath his eyes—and you press. There's a knack to it, of course; if you know just how, out pops his eye!"

"Oh!" she gasped in horror. "And you—did that?"

"Less than a month ago," he confessed. "And, if you want to know the kind of a man I am—well, I've kept it with me as a sort of a luck charm!"

"You mean—" She shuddered and reined back from him.

"Want to see it?" asked Rapidan. The hand in his pocket flashed out and there in the palm she saw a shiny and remarkably blue and ingenuous glass eye.

"Oh!" she cried out again and her face went as red as a peony as it dawned on her that this sober-faced wretch had been playing with her as no man had ever so much as thought of doing with Vega Alarcon. Even his pronunciation of her name, tricking her into correcting him, had been for the sake of his own amusement. Her whip went up as though she meant to strike

him. Then she whirled her horse and—there is no other word for it—fled.

He watched her speculatively.

"They've stuffed that poor little thing so full of pride that she can hardly breathe," he concluded. "Aside from that I'd bet a man she isn't so bad."

Having watched her out of sight he recalled the poor couple that she had ridden here to serve notice on and walked to the house. The Bowens, Agatha and Marlborough, were on their rickety porch and constituted a study in listless resignation. Agatha drooped in an old rocking chair, Marlborough draped his bony figure about a post supporting the crooked shed-roof. The man had the most melancholy pale blue eyes Rapidan had ever looked into; one expected slow tears to well up and spill over at every moment. He was untidy; he looked poverty-stricken: Torn overalls, torn coat with sleeves altogether too short, unkempt beard like a caricatured Russian in all save color which was indeterminate, some extraordinary dirty blend of red and yellow. The woman in her ragged dress and with her hair all about her face was in all things his most harmonious complement. Instead of man and wife, they might have been brother and sister. One would have been hard beset, were their faces hidden and only their eyes seen, to have told Agatha's from Marlborough's. They looked gaunt, hopeless and utterly helpless derelicts. And yet, strange enough to seem incredible, the couple though unmistakably wretched seemed steeped in an invulnerable placidity.

Rapidan greeted them with a cheery good morning. Marlborough responded wearily as though he had heard a voice from some tremendous distance and had little hope of his own reaching the ears of him who

had spoken. Agatha sighed after a fashion to cause Rapidan to remember his own humbug sighs of a moment ago. He regarded the two of them interestedly and not without pity. At first he had taken them for old people, old and feeble; now he saw that they could not be over forty or forty-five and should be in the prime of life. Too young, positively, to be crushed to earth.

"I couldn't help hearing what Miss Alarcon said," said Rapidan. "Well, sometimes what looks like bad luck—"

"It's the end," said Marlborough Bowen in a sort of dispirited whine, lifting a bony arm a few inches only to let it fall weakly to his side. "Unhappy, unfortunate and undone, we're swept away by the broom of adversity and deposited at last upon the very dust-heap of ruination. It—is—the—end."

"Come," said Rapidan brightly, "it's never so bad as that. There is always an up to every down; the harder the ball comes down the higher it bounces."

"Young man," said Marlborough Bowen turning upon him a look of filmy commiseration, "you know not of what you speak. When you have dwelt longer in this vale of tears, as the poet names the world, you will come by the saddest of human legacies, Knowledge. Then will you know. You see before you a man —yes, and a wo-man—who, like truth crushed to earth, may rise no more. We—are—smitten."

While he spoke Agatha bowed her head like one listening to the funeral sermon, living on only to hear the final thud of the falling sods of earth; when he had done she lifted her head only to nod slowly, three times, in silent agreement.

Rapidan, as though accepting a challenge, set out

to win them to some ruddier glow of good humor. He knew there were times when the world did have to do with eclipses, and when men required cheering up. But again Marlborough Bowen started to lift his dangling arm, only to give up in the endeavor, while putting the bleak situation more clearly into bleak words:

"Young man, your time has not yet come to plunge you into sorrow, so you know not whereof you speak. About our heads misfortunes have flocked like ravens; we sleep with sorrow, we awake with despair. Pain, privation and—and—*penury!*" he ejaculated with a palid flash of triumph. "Those three sit at our board three times per day."

Rapidan sat down on the top step and began loading his pipe. What merry companions they were, these two! Through the open door he could see the room's disorderly appearance. Leaning against a wall was a pair of crutches.

"Neither of you is lame, I trust?" he queried and got his pipe going.

They had seen his glance and understood. Agatha sighed; Marlborough explained.

"Not—yet," he acknowledged, and seemed sort of apologetic about it, too. "But we prepare for the future all that we can, young man. Thus, with each added burden, do we strive to bear onward. One never knows what fresh disaster is sweeping on upon him."

"You haven't by any chance," Rapidan suggested faintly, "provided against the great common disaster? I mean—coffins—"

Marlborough actually looked pleased—in a sad sort of way.

"We have, young man! Two of them. I could show them to you; we keep them under our bed."

"It was my thought, you know, Marlborough," spoke up Agatha.

"I will admit," said Marlborough, though perhaps a trifle reluctantly, "that it was you, Agatha, who first put that thought into words."

Obviously much more might have been said, but he put restraint upon himself and stopped. After that nothing short of a team of horses could have pulled Rapidan away until he got their story. They had been here for some five or six years; and on coming had been briefly tricked into thinking that their long span of misfortunes were at an end. For the place had been beautiful then, the house looking fresh and pretty, the orchard blooming, poultry making a lively din, vegetable garden offering richly and bounteously of itself. Don Luis Alarcon had instated them here; they meant to give credit where credit was due, you may be sure. And surely some good could be spoken of that man and they would speak it, no matter what others might say of him, no matter what injustice he may or may not be guilty of. He had gone for them, had brought them many miles to this place and had told them to consider themselves at home. They, in their turn, must occupy themselves only with the regulation of the water flow through the big pipes and with being happy.

But, alas, misfortune had followed them. He could see by looking about him; the dismal tale scarcely needed the telling. Year by year things had altered, invariably for the worse. Each year the fruit trees bore less than the year before; last year's crop had been an utter disappointment. The trees were even dying; there would be no orchard at all before long. And so with everything else: Chickens and turkeys and ducks, where were they? All gone, as one could see. Look at

the house itself; the very, insensate boards took on a look of misery.

Rapidan let his pipe go out; he stared and could scarcely bring himself to believe his ears. He could guess which way the fowls had gone; their bones had been picked long and long ago! And here the disconsolate Marlborough Bowen told the whole tale; pictured bounty dwindling down into scarcity and finally absconding entirely to leave only decay in its wake and appeared as innocent of the true explanation as a child one day old! He didn't even bestir himself to walk a hundred yards to turn a valve in a water pipe, but sat patiently awaiting the crash about his ears.

"And," said Rapidan, "I've a notion there are in the world a goodly number of us just like you!"

"Ah," whined Marlborough, "you speak truly, young man. Misfortune, mischance and misery stalk abroad over the land, ready to lay a hand upon every shoulder."

Rapidan grunted and his grunt came close to being a snort. Then, inwardly, he chuckled; these were two rare birds, such as he had never encountered in his life of wandering, such as he could never hope to encounter again; though you sought to the ends of earth you'd not find their like. And then, being Rapidan, he lifted a grave face, a face that was almost mournful in its gravity, and admitted,

"Ah, it's a hard, hard world. A vale of tears? Too true? But what should we expect of it, Mr. Bowen? Man was made to mourn. Why even Pliny," he cried in a flash of inspiration, "reminds us that at birth each one of us starts breathing with wailing! What new baby ever began with laughter? No; the knowledge of grief is born in us! We start with tears, we wander

on through sad and evil days, we round out our lives in sorrow. Ah, it's a sad, sad world!"

Now, surely, Marlborough Bowen's face brightened. Even a tombstone may brighten in the light of the torches borne by the funeral procession. He seemed to glow dimly with melancholy joy. Here was such a man as might have been a son to him and Agatha. A kindred spirit, certainly.

He had not really unburdened himself until now. Even Agatha looked up at him in sorrowful admiration. He outdid himself. He revelled in gloom, he wallowed in sloughs of despond. He conjured up his ghastly visions of sepulchres and charnel houses, driving his alliterative epithets three abreast among them like black hearse horses in full panoply of somber net and funereal plume. Sorrow, suffering and sin; death, disaster and doom; Azrael, affliction and adversity.

And Rapidan "sat at his feet," proper posture for worthy pupil in the presence of the master, and looked up at him in high approval. More, when a pause came now and then, it was Rapidan's chorus that filled the gaps; it was Rapidan who made the very most of the possibilities of a long face as he spoke sadly of man's inhumanity to man; of such cheerless topics as death and taxation; who agreed fully that not only was the present dark and glowering for the house of Bowen, but that surely the future loomed even more sinister. He strove to recall lines from the City of Dreadful Night; *there* was a thing which Marlborough Bowen should have by heart! And always was the patient Agatha, stirring weakly in the coma of resignation, ready with her silent acquiescence; after each and every stygian picture drawn she roused herself to her three measured nods.

Rapidan had a most enjoyable time of it. And the Bowens? When he said that he must "crawl along," they pleaded with him to linger; at least he must promise to come back to them. Marlborough grasped his hand with big, clamping bony fingers and thanked him huskily; never, he said, had he and Agatha had so pleasant, so congenial a visitor. So strong was his emotion that for once his vocabulary escaped him, his trio of apocalyptic steeds deserted him, and at loss for resonant syllables he could only conclude weakly:

"We've had a real good time, haven't we?"

Rapidan could have whooped in high glee. But instead he made his silent, subdued and sorrowful farewells, and returned to his horses.

But as he strode along, chuckling at first, his amusement seeped out of him, and something quite different seeped in.

"Grr!" he said disgustedly.

After all he had played with pitch and some of it had stuck to him. Out here in the clean sunshine of a sudden he felt befouled; as though he needed a bath and an emetic! He shook himself vigorously.

"Makes a man feel crawly," he grunted. "Downright—*wormy!* Those two! They came here into a corner of paradise and set up their radio station G-L-O-O-M. Busy night and day tuning in to grief; wide open all the time to every kind of misfortune man can possibly invent, with a reception you simply can't beat for all that is unhappy and—loathsome. Where a man might find ecstasy they drag in static; it whines about their heads like all the lost souls in the inferno. Lord forgive me, I feel like I'd been toastmaster at a ghouls' banquet!"

He stood looking about him with a new understand-

ing. This place, a few years ago, had been a beauty-spot. Then the Bowens had come—and look at it now!

"I guess a man can tune into any sort of wave he fancies," meditated Rapidan soberly. "You open up to what you're looking for, good or bad and—Bingo! it's on you. Well, here's where I give my dials a spin! My soul ought to be sent out to the cleaners; but maybe just sunning it will kill the mildew.— *Uf!*"

Black Diamond whinnied a greeting and Rapidan went to him.

"And they haven't even shut off the water yet, old boy!" he exclaimed, glimpsing the pipes just beyond his horse. "The Young Queen herself raced off and forgot it! Wonder if we can get the hang of it?—Six, miles on to Spanish Hacienda? Hm! Come ahead, Diamond, while the ponies rest. We'd make that little ride just to see this Don Luis Alarcon. Think of it; he's had these Chief Mourners here for years, and borne with 'em! What a man he must be!—Yes, Diamond, we'd take the little ride just to feast our eyes on him—even if we weren't wondering about a certain red-bay saddle horse with white forefeet."

CHAPTER X

SPANISH HACIENDA was the name loosely applied to the enormous landed estate of Don Luis Alarcon. The whole six miles which Rapidan rode from the little desolate valley to the centrally located edifice housing the distinguished family extended across Alarcon land. And it was land to stir Rapidan's admiration; he had seen nothing to compare with it for many a day. Here were water and fertility; slopes dotted with fat browsing herds; broad grain fields; dimples in the hills made cool and shady with thick-foliaged trees; lush meadows. A dozen times he splashed through Alarcon Creek on his way.

From afar he saw the white walls and red tiled roof of the big rambling house. It crowned a gentle knoll in the midst of rolling fields. There were outbuildings, white-walled and red-roofed like the pretentious home; pepper trees, sycamores and cottonwoods spread their black shadows across a smooth lawn with its outer high wall of adobe, neatly white-washed. The air all about, warm and fresh, was sweetened with fragrances distilled by the genial sun from the groves of orange and lemon and grapefruit commingled with the soft perfume of red and yellow roses. In the drowsy air was a quiet hum as of peace and content, the voices of a thousand pigeons.

Rapidan dismounted at a stable ample enough to house a hundred horses. A young Mexican in beautiful high heeled boots, freshly polished, and a more than beautiful hat, broad of brim, lofty of crown, tasselated,

of ornate band, came forward to flash him a white-toothed greeting and take his horse. Rapidan asked for Señor Alarcon and was directed to the house.

He passed through an imposing iron-grilled gateway set in the high adobe wall, and into the enclosure which partook of both garden and park. A second young Mexican, all in fresh white ducks, was polishing the massive hardware of a front door of truly noble proportions. Him also Rapidan asked for Señor Alarcon.

"Si, señor," replied the boy, eyeing him with naïve interest. And lifting his voice called softly, *"Señor Mayordomo!"*

And here, shuffling softly along the wide, flagged hallway, came one to make Rapidan, or any man, open his eyes. An old man, slight and thin and crowned with white hair—but garbed in what resplendent livery! No field marshal in all his glory, no princeling loaded with splendid orders, no, not even the head dignitary of a modern metropolitan hotel could have outshone this *"Señor Mayordomo,"* of Don Luis Alarcon's establishment. Rapidan, in the high humor of obeying impulses to-day, clicked his boot-heels together and paid tribute to all this majesty of appearance with a snapping military salute. And the old man, seeming weighted down less by years than by all that gold braid he carried, grew taller by a fraction of an inch—and looked pleased.

"Señor Alarcon?" asked Rapidan for the third time.

He was gravely invited to enter and was ushered into a lofty and spacious room to await Alarcon's coming. One got the hotel idea here again; formal furniture formally placed, a gilt mantel over an ample fire-

place containing gilt andirons; gilded chairs with golden cushions. Be sure that the sun, shining in through the several broad windows, lost none of his golden glory in this golden place! Rapidan gravely regarded the oil paintings whose pictured countenances as gravely regarded him in return. What a top-lofty set they were! Ladies and gentlemen, the wearers of laces and the bearers of swords, in their gold frames they had the appearance of looking out through golden doors—and conveyed the impression that, if one stared too vulgarly, they would surely withdraw and slam those golden doors in the vulgar face.

"He has even gilded his ancestors," was Rapidan's inward comment. "Well, no doubt that's just what most ancestors need."

A pleasant voice addressed him from the doorway; he had not heard the oncoming steps upon the thick carpet.

"You honor my poor house with your presence, señor."

Rapidan took him in with a sweeping glance. Miss Alarcon's father; never a doubt of it. A voice which, masculine enough, suggested her own; an enunciation —he had spoken in English, that being obviously the courteous thing to do, Rapidan being so patently American—recalling hers, having even a richer Spanish inflection; he certainly said "weeth" for "with."

"Your 'poor house,' señor," said Rapidan bowing, "is, to me, a palace."

Alarcon looked pleased; just as the majordomo had looked when he was saluted. But he banished the expression and indulged in a deprecatory shrug and a waved hand in pure nonchalance.

In his own person, as everywhere else in his sur-

roundings, Don Luis Alarcon struck a note which you did not have dinned in your ears every day. Still a young man, certainly not over forty-five and hardly looking to be forty, he carried himself with an amount of dignity that could not have been more emphatic in a man twice his age; he was as stiff as a ramrod and, except when he allowed himself to look pleased, as just now, or smile as he did at times, he gave its full meaning to the word Hauteur. In a word, he reeked with pride.

Such a man must not even dress as other men do. (Rapidan found himself wondering if he even ate or drank or smoked or slept like any mere mortal.) He wore the smallest, tightest and highest-heeled black boots imaginable; above the boot tops he was clothed in rich black velvet pantaloons girded about by a broad black silk belt, gold-buckled. Above the belt a pure white silk shirt, a black velvet jacket with gold buttons. Then the loose, flowing black tie—and above all this, the haughty countenance of Don Luis Alarcon.

It was a handsome face, dark and passionate. Full, black, intelligent eyes, heavy black mustache twisted somewhat fiercely at the ends, a small black chin-beard. His brow was high and broad; his hair, ink-black, worn longer than most men's and allowed to curl upward at the ends.

"And he wouldn't be a bad sort, at that," Rapidan decided, "if they hadn't told him about his ancestors."

"I was taking the liberty to look at your pictures," he said.

Don Luis bowed.

"You honor me with your interest. Yonder," and he raised a hand to indicate an oil across the room and at the same time dazzled Rapidan's eyes with the largest

diamond they had ever seen, "is Lope Felix de Vega Carpio, of whom, señor, you will have heard, the immortal Spanish poet; seventeenth century. Yonder, Garcilasso de la Vega; you may have heard him named from his connection with the rulers of Peru, Inca de la Vega. And here— But I may not burden you with my family, eh, señor?"

"It is a privilege," began Rapidan. But Alarcon waved his hand, diamond and all, in what Rapidan catalogued as the "Off with his head," gesture.

"At some other time, then, señor," continued Alarcon. "I must remember that you have come to see me on some matter concerning which I am, so far, uninformed. Even your name, señor—"

"Rapidan."

Don Luis inclined his head courteously and repeated —there was no *almost* about it this time—"Rah-pee-than. Señor Rah-pee-than. I am honored, señor."

Rapidan's nod, though curter than Alarcon's bow, acknowledged the compliment and returned it.

"As to my errand, Señor Alarcon, there are three matters. First of them, I confess to trespassing. I have left my team on your land, near the place where the Bowens are living."

"It is impossible, señor, to trespass on Alarcon land," was the smiling response. "What I hold during my lifetime is, after all, God's, and every traveler is welcome. My fences are to keep my cattle in, not to keep men out."

"Thank you. And I'll not greatly impose upon you as I'll be going on to my own place this evening. Concerning that place, I understand that you hold a mortgage against it; six hundred dollars and—"

"Then," interrupted Alarcon swiftly, "it is the Bill Smith place? I am right, señor?"

"Quite. Was the Bill Smith place, to be altogether exact; mine now—saving for your mortgage. And I should like—"

"But," cried the other warmly, "we are neighbors then? And, look, I have not so much as had you sit down! You would pay the mortgage off? Well, well, anything you like, Mr. Rapidan. Only you must forgive me for failing in hospitality, if in ever so little. A chair— Or, come; we shall go into the patio, señor, where it is always pleasant. And there we are going to talk!"

He turned to lead the way and Rapidan went with him. There was the long hallway with shadowy doors opening to right and left, glimpses of a dozen rooms and now and then of old-fashioned iron-grilled windows. Ahead of them, at the hallway's end, an arched doorway and the inner court, true heart of your Spanish home.

They were half way down the hall before Rapidan noted something which gave him on the spur of the moment a positive shock. The next instant he called himself a fool for it. Yet there it was just the same. The man at his side walked with the slightest limp; a limp which all but escaped notice and was scarcely worthy the name. A tight boot, even, might explain it. But there was no other name for it; a limp it was—of the left leg.

The patio was, of course, a place of delight. There was the little fountain playing away merrily, singing to itself and tumbling into the pool basing it, making this a cool, murmurous spot; there were fragrant

shrubs and blooming flowers; the golden fruit of an orange looked out through the rich green of the heavy leaves and brushed white scented blossoms.

Alarcon indicated chairs. An iron table, of the same blue as the cloudless sky which was the only canopy here, stood before them. Rapidan noted idly that the ash tray upon it was half full of the ends of cigarettes. And he could not but note the hat on the ground near the table leg. An old gray Stetson of a common variety, one that had seen much use, that was soiled and stained—and that had a peculiar band about it. But these things at first he noted only very casually; his mind, confound it, was still upon that very slight, scarcely noticeable limp.

"You will smoke, señor? A cigarette? Or a cigar?"

Rapidan made his own cigarette and Don Luis did the same. The brown wheat-straw paper in Rapidan's fingers, the white rice paper in Alarcon's were deftly and swiftly rolled and were lighted at the same match.

"And now, señor, if you care to tell me of your new rancho? And how I may oblige you?"

"A very small matter, really. In taking the place I had to assume the mortgage."

He stopped there and was for so long silent that Alarcon, waiting for him to go on, had to prompt him, saying:

"*Si, señor.* I understand. And, of course, you would like to have your property clear?"

Rapidan started. His mind had been far afield. What was the matter with him, anyway? He hadn't come here to spy on his new neighbor; he had no business, certainly, in concerning himself with a lot of trifles which could not conceivably have anything to do with him. And yet that was exactly what he was do-

ing. A man's limp, to begin with. Then a hat on the ground by the table. Then the pile of cigarette ends—

"If you don't mind," he said. "There's six hundred dollars, I believe; and the interest, of course—"

Alarcon waved his hand.

"At any moment you like, Mr. Rapidan. As for the interest," he smiled again. "A very small thing and, between neighbors, perhaps it would be best if we ignored that?"

"That's very good of you," returned Rapidan with an answering smile. "But I trust we can be neighborly without my actually robbing you. Then in a day or two, when I can get around to it, we'll dispose of this."

"I am going away for a few days to-morrow. When I return, señor? Or, if you like best, my lawyers—"

"When you come back; fine."

That hat now: He had seen it somewhere and, reminding himself of Charlie Krebs, had to keep asking himself where? One should remember it; an old, battered, dirty gray Stetson, having a character quite its own as all old hats have, it was further individualized by its band. A band of dull black leather and, in that, common enough. But through tiny slits ran a narrow strip of led leather making a rather striking design. You'd remember a thing like that. Rapidan did. And, though he could not yet come at the reason, it irritated him that he could not fit the hat to its owner's head.

Certainly it was no hat of the exquisite and somewhat pompous Don Luis Alarcon! Imagine it on his head? Impossible.

It belonged to the man who, a few minutes ago, had been sitting here talking with Alarcon. Half the cigarettes in the ash tray were of thin white paper such as Alarcon smoked now; the others were of brown wheat-

straw, like Rapidan's own. Left by the man of the hat—he had gone away hastily as Rapidan came—

A limp which did not concern him, a hat and a heap of cigarette ends which did not concern him—Well, he might as well go ahead with another matter which concerned him no more; might be a neighborly thing to do. At any rate,

"There is another thing," he said, turning to his host who, he feared, began to ask himself what sort of an odd fish this caller was. "I don't want to be downright impertinent, but this may interest you. First, do you mind if I ask if by any chance you were in Nacional last night?"

Alarcon shook his head and permitted his eyes to express what his lips refrained from saying; that this, coming from a stranger, was an odd inquiry.

"No, señor," he said aloud. "I remained here at home."

"Well, a horse which I think must belong to you was there. Did you know?"

"A horse belonging to me?" Again he shook his head, though not so positively now. "No, I did not know. Are you sure, señor?"

"If it is your horse. A tall red-bay; two white front feet that look, at a little distance, like half socks? A white blotch on one nostril? A small scar, roughly V-shaped on the left shoulder?"

"But, señor! *Valgame Dios,* you describe for me one of my favorite saddle horses!"

There was interest enough in his eyes now, frowning interest. He looked at Rapidan curiously.

"You have an eye for horses, Mr. Rapidan," he said quickly.

"Yes."

"Are you sure you saw that horse last night in Nacional? You are sure? And something happened to make you interested, to have you speak to me of it—"

"A dozen words tell the tale," said Rapidan. "You're welcome to it."

Briefly he told of the affair at the stable, his own part omitted. Alarcon, his frown deepening all the while, listened intently. He tossed his cigarette away and made a new one, staring at it thoughtfully.

"This is a strange thing, Mr. Rapidan," he said very gravely. "I do not understand.—Has some one—Is it possible—"

Abruptly he fell silent. And it was during this short silence while Alarcon brooded, that Rapidan heard a muffled sound which, at any other time in the world would have gone unheeded. Somewhere near by, in one of the rooms opening on the patio, a man sneezed. Sneezed, tried to stop the paroxysm and sneezed again. It sounded as though he had clapped both hands over his mouth, or as though he had put his face in a pillow.

From the sneeze Rapidan remembered the hat—and from the hat he was sure of the man who sneezed. Bill Smith who always had hay fever! Bill Smith who, the courts had declared, had been murdered and burned by Jim Terril! Bill Smith hidden here, at Spanish Hacienda!

Don Luis was on his feet in an instant.

"Shall we go to the stable and look at that horse, Mr. Rapidan?"

"By all means," said Rapidan drily.

CHAPTER XI

THAT Don Luis Alarcon was anxious to get him away from the patio and out of the house, Rapidan felt positive. Alarcon had shown nothing in his face; his manner had been quiet enough. But Rapidan was of the opinion that it was that sneeze, rather than the mention of the white-footed horse which caused the quick suggestion that they go to the stable.

Alarcon led the way down the long hall; he gave no evidence of haste, walking slowly with that touch of pomposity in his carriage, seeming merely thoughtful as any man might be after having Rapidan's news with its natural implication. And walking this way, at hardly more than a snail's pace, his limp or slight hesitancy of the left leg, disappeared. He got his hat from the rack at the front door, a large black, obviously expensive Stetson, and they went out into the mid-forenoon sunlight. They had encountered no one on their way, not so much as catching a glimpse of the ornate majordomo.

If Alarcon was thoughtful, Rapidan was not less so. Making mountains out of mole-hills is one of the simplest of human tasks. There was that limp of Don Luis; *was* it a limp at all? If a man's leg had gone to sleep or if he had a troublesome corn or if a boot pinched, he might walk as Don Luis had in the beginning. That he did not do so now might be because the slight annoyance of a moment had passed—or because he had taken warning and was man enough, Spartan enough, to conquer pain and refuse to flinch and so betray himself.

So much for that—for the present. The hat remained, a very real and unmistakable physical object. And there was that tell-tale sound, muffled, in an adjoining room.

"Señor Alarcon," said Rapidan bluntly as they went slowly through the garden, "I noticed a hat in the patio."

His host lifted a pair of meditative eyes to regard him curiously. Both faces at the moment were grave and noncommittal. Alarcon was in no haste to speak; he had ample time before replying to be assured that his visitor would have no reason to mention so trifling a thing unless he saw in it something to lift it above trifles.

"You have the quickest of eyes, Mr. Rapidan," he said at last. "You had seen it before, *no?* And remembered?"

"Yes. Worn by a man named Bill Smith."

Alarcon nodded, if so dignified an inclination of the head could be termed a nod. Rapidan awaited the explanation of Bill Smith's hat being in the patio. But no explanation appeared to be forthcoming. So far as Alarcon was concerned the subject was abandoned. Not so with Rapidan.

"Bill Smith is generally supposed to be dead," he remarked in his drawling way.

"Si, señor. Murdered. At his own place."

"And the body burned!"

"Si, señor."

"It is difficult to identify a body that has been burned," said Rapidan. "So it remains possible it may have been some other man. And that Bill Smith is not dead after all."

Once more Alarcon regarded him gravely. Here was

a man, thought Rapidan, whose eyes instead of mirroring his secret thought stood like sentinels between another man's observation and whatever might lurk behind them in the citadel of his brain. Don Luis impressed him as a man of strong emotions held firmly in check; a man who set a guard upon himself, who was at once emotional and repressed; a man trained to the trick of sheathing himself in armor. Yes, one who could smile while his fox gnawed.

"You suggest the fantastic, do you not, Mr. Rapidan? And all because you have happened to stumble upon a hat? No, there was no chance of error in the identification; the court moved most cautiously. And, since I see that the hat troubles you, I brought it to the house myself. I found it on my ride, out in the fields. I, too, thought it looked like Smith's and meant to ask some of my men.—How it chanced to be out in the fields, I don't know." He shrugged. "Nor, I suppose, does it matter, eh?"

"I heard a man sneeze," said Rapidan sharply.

"Why, so did I!" He laughed softly. "It was my old majordomo, Esteban. He has an old fashioned habit; he takes snuff and sneezes violently." His laughter, low and quite musical, rumbled on. "And you thought, 'Aha! A hat and a sneeze, and here we have Bill Smith come back from the dead to hide in the house of Don Luis Alarcon!' "

If he played a part he did so to perfection. It was as though he cried out: "What an absurdity! To suspect me, *me,* Don Luis Alarcon, of such a thing! Too absurd to make me lose my temper, señor; the very thing to make me laugh at you—as I do!"

But Rapidan was very far from being satisfied. Here, it struck him, were altogether too many happen-

ings of that peculiar order which he had discussed with Barfoot in Nacional, which one might label off hand as coincidences—or might regard otherwise.

"I see," he said; and added lightly, "Of course it was natural for me to note the sneeze, once I'd seen the hat."

There came a twinkle into Alarcon's eyes.

"You are a man, then, of a lively imagination, señor?"

"Perhaps," rejoined Rapidan.

"Is it possible, then, that when you speak of having seen my horse during that affair in Nacional—that you confused it with some other horse?"

He remained very courteous in his speech and manner, suavely polite, and yet there was a little flick of mockery in his words.

"Perhaps," answered Rapidan again, cool and indifferent. "After all there are several horses in the world with white forefeet."

They were at the stable now. The young Mexican of the beautiful boots and more than beautiful hat came forward lifting his hat.

"El Capitan is in his stall, Ernesto?" asked Don Luis.

"Si, señor."

"We are going to look at him."

Ernesto led the way, hurrying ahead and bringing out the haltered animal for their inspection.

"Yes," said Rapidan. "This is the horse I saw this morning; the one I thought I saw last night." And he added to himself, "The one I know I saw and rode last night!"

"Put him back in the stall, Ernesto," Don Luis commanded. And, as they went out, "You did not tell me,

señor, where you saw El Capitan this morning? Here, in my stable?"

"At the other end of your ranch. Where, as I explained, I was trespassing upon you. Miss Alarcon was riding him."

"Ah. Yes, she rode early. She loves horses; there are not many who can ride as my daughter rides! She is out somewhere now, with—See, señor; there they come!"

Two mounted figures were just then sweeping up into full sight as they topped one of the little billowy hills in the distance. They were still a full mile away but looked much closer in the clear air with the blue sky behind them.

"It is our friend Don Fernando Molinar with my daughter," announced Don Luis; and there was his pride again, standing tall and dominant in his quick black eyes. "You are going to know him, Mr. Rapidan; a Molinar of the Molinars! He, too, is of the *sangre azul,* a blood of as rich a blue as that sky you see like a curtain behind them. There are but few of that kind, as you know, anywhere; here, along the border, too few. We are fortunate, *no?* He was our guest last night; he remains for another day or two, perhaps."

"Mexican?" said Rapidan, though his eyes were upon the slenderer figure, more compelling even at this distance.

Don Luis shrugged, and his shrug was almost a wince as of pain.

"Through the mere accident of birth, señor," he said stiffly. "Otherwise, Castilian Spanish.—Of yourself, had it chanced that your parents visited China at the time of your birth, would you name yourself Chinese?—Ah, look! Now they race for home! And

now you will see pretty riding with horses running like birds! Aha! Ahaha!"

It was "pretty." Two splendid horses, golden-sorrel and satin-black, neck and neck coming along with a fine rush across the fields, silver gleams darting out from Spanish bit and bridle chains.

"My Vega will win," laughed Don Luis contentedly. "You will see. She is on La Golondrina, the Swallow, you know, señor. The other horse, though of my own stable, and all my horses are swift, is not in what you call the class of Golondrina. Also, Señor Molinar is heavier. Most of all, I tell you, there are few to ride as the Señorita Vega rides! Aha!—Ahaha!"

The exclamation burst from him because the golden-sorrel had forged into the lead with a gallant burst of speed; the girl sat erect in the saddle, her hat-brim blown back by the wind of her speeding. Rapidan nodded approval; yes, she could ride. She rode in the style of Western riding, as though she and her horse were one.

She turned her head a little and must have laughed, though the distance was still too great for them to hear the laughter above the increasing thunderous beat of the flying hoofs. For Molinar began lashing his mount, his quirt whipping back and forth across the animal's straining withers.

"A Molinar does not like being behind," chuckled Don Luis, rubbing his hands. "And an Alarcon likes to lead!"

"He's raking his horse unmercifully with his spurs," said Rapidan as they came closer. "No sense in that; he's going to lose any way."

"But loss comes hard—to a Molinar! Now watch. —Ah! She is going to take the fence!"

The horses came straight on, across the field. Between them and the stable yard in which Rapidan and Alarcon stood was a high board fence and along the fence, on the stable side, an irrigation ditch. Thus, if Vega Alarcon really meant to take the fence, she had before her the double hazard with the ditch, too, to be cleared. Rapidan allowed his face to show his surprise. Yes, it would be a pretty jump—and daring—if she could make it. Alarcon read his look and smiled.

"Vamos a ver, señor," he said lightly. "We are going to see!"

Until the very last Rapidan more than half expected to see her swerve and ride along the fence to the gate. But as she came rushing on, closer and yet closer, he saw her face, and then he knew. It struck him that she looked very determined and very cool, and she was going to put the golden-sorrel to the fence.

He had time for a quick sidelong glance at her father. The girl was attempting a feat difficult enough to be termed downright dangerous; if her horse lost his stride across the none-too-level field, if a flying hoof caught, if the distance were misjudged so that the leap fell short, a bad fall resulted. For her part, she appeared exhilarated but perfectly confident and unruffled. And Rapidan saw that her father was watching her with amused, expectant and serenely untroubled eyes.

"They have nerve, these Alarcons!" was Rapidan's swift decision.

His whole interest was centered in Vega Alarcon now. Yet, despite that fact, for an instant his attention was drawn away from her and to the man racing her. Again the golden-sorrel had swept into the lead and again Molinar, resenting his position in the rear,

strove hotly to spur and lash his satin-black into the victor's place.

The girl rode superbly, her weight balanced nicely as she lifted her mount to the fence and sailed over in what looked like an effortless flight. And Don Fernando Molinar, who should have known vastly better, rode badly. He could not well have made more of a mess of it. He threw his animal out of its gait when too late to catch it again, confusing the poor beast with bloodied rowels and flailing quirt. Even so the black rose beautifully and came as near as gallant horseflesh could to clearing the obstruction taken under handicap of a rider who had lost his head. But a hoof struck the top rail; in mid-air the horse seemed to twist sideways; Molinar at last sensed his danger and, as the horse fell, sought to throw himself out of the saddle and so to comparative safety. There was a mighty splash as horse and rider floundered in the irrigation ditch.

Both Rapidan and Don Luis ran forward. Vega Alarcon had stopped her horse half way across the stable yard and whirled about to come back. The fallen rider appeared unhurt, scrambling hastily up the muddy bank of the ditch. Incidentally, he constituted a picture which caused Rapidan to nod his head in grim approval. Foppishly dressed, the extravagant Mexican dandyism of young Molinar was for the moment eclipsed by streaming water and oozy mud; his heavy black mustaches drooped dismally; his no less that fifty-*peso* hat was lost; his face was splotched with mud—and looked ugly with shame and rage.

Vega looked at him at first in horror. He was a Molinar; a Molinar of the Molinars! It was unthinkable that one of his order should have to suffer such an

indignity. That a horse should have failed its rider when that rider was Don Fernando; that earth and water should so befoul one of the name!

But Vega Alarcon, though a young woman trained by her father into a reverential attitude toward all true nobility of the blood, yet remained a spontaneous, impulsive and naturally mirthful individual. She had what Rapidan termed "a highly developed funny bone." Don Fernando was unhurt; and he was irresistibly ridiculous. The concern fled from her eyes and they brightened with purely mischievous amusement; she fairly dimpled with unvoiced laughter.

Molinar saw the look on her face, saw the grim satisfaction shining in Rapidan's eyes. Shame and rage got a fresh grip on him and goaded him to folly. He had lost in his fall something which may prove to be a good deal more expensive than a fifty dollar hat, namely a flaring temper. The horse which had failed him and made him a laughing stock stood close at hand, trembling with fright, lifting a strained fore leg gingerly. Molinar caught it by the bridle and vented his wrath upon it.

"Pig!" he named it, a naturally pleasant voice breaking nervously and becoming shrill. "You—you—"

But not having as yet entirely forgotten himself he checked a flow of abuse which he could not have made too vile for the occasion were not Miss Alarcon present. He clamped his mouth shut in a cruel and hard line and struck the horse a vicious blow over the head with his heavy quirt. The animal lunged wildly, trying to break free, but a muscular arm jerked it back by the savage Spanish bit and the quirt rose and fell again.

A look of horror leaped into Vega's eyes.

"Oh!" she cried out, as though her own flesh felt the blow.

Rapidan with two quick long strides was at Molinar's side; his hand shut down with a will upon the wet shoulder.

"You've lost your head, man," he said sharply. "It wasn't the horse's fault."

Who's fault then? As if Molinar in his present mood, or in any mood, cared to be told! He wrenched free and swung his quirt high above his head. Rapidan shot out a long arm and locked about Molinar's wrist and saved the horse the third blow.

And now Molinar did entirely forget himself, and now there was no check upon the stream of invective which burst from his lips. Were there ten Vega Alarcons listening, the words must boil forth. But this time the object of his rage was Rapidan instead of the black saddle horse. He was markedly careless in his choice of epithets; he used those which suggested themselves first—and they were not pretty.

"Shut up!" cried Rapidan warningly. "Shut up, I tell you!"

"You—you dirty——"

Rapidan silenced him before the words were fully out; he struck as clean and hard a blow as he had ever delivered. As Molinar's quirt fell across his shoulders his own fist struck the distorted face square in the lip-lifted mouth—and for the second time Fernando Molinar was hurled bodily into the muddy ditch.

"What have you done, señor!" gasped Don Luis.

"Knocked a dirty blackguard back into the mud where he belongs," retorted Rapidan angrily.

"He is a Molinar, señor! He is my friend!"

"He is a brute with a horse; a vicious, cowardly brute."

"The horse," Don Luis reminded him stiffly, "it is not yours!"

"It's a horse, just the same—a fine horse, too."

Don Luis was putting out a hand to help his friend up the muddy bank. Molinar, beside himself, thrust him away and slipped a hand inside his shirt. But Don Luis sprang on him and caught his arm.

"No, no, Don Fernando! That will not do! There must be no blood shed.—Not here; not on my rancho. Not now, Molinar!"

Molinar looked at him dully. Slowly his hand was withdrawn, empty.

"You are right, my friend. Not now—"

He turned toward the house. Don Luis hurried after him.

Vega Alarcon sat on her horse as rigidly as though turned to stone. Her mirth had vanished, the look of teasing amusement in her eyes was wiped out. She looked at Rapidan in a strange, almost awestruck way; as though she refused to believe that she had seen what she had seen.

"You did not know what you did!" she said in a hushed, strained voice. "He is a Molinar!"

To her, trained as she had been from babyhood, it was desecration, nothing less, that she had witnessed. She had seen an enfuriated man beat a horse over the head, and she had cringed back from the sight and had cried out piteously. She loved horses as her father had said; the sight had sickened her. But, whereas she had seen horses whipped before, she had never even dreamed that a hand might be lifted against a Moli-

nar. It was as unthinkable an outrage as striking an Alarcon!

When Rapidan said nothing but merely looked his perplexity, she cried out hotly:

"You are a common brawler; you told me as much when you talked this morning of fighting—"

"Rankles, does it, my tale of the glass eye?" drawled Rapidan.

She flashed him a look whose plain intent was to burn and wither him with scorn, and rode away to the stable. Rapidan followed slowly, not to overtake her, but to get his own horse. When a corner of the stable hid her he glanced idly at the two men going to the house. And so he chanced upon another discovery, one which might have no significance—or a very great deal.

Don Luis again appeared to limp slightly, hardly noticeably; the left leg, of course. But that was not what held Rapidan's fascinated gaze. Molinar, too, limped; it was most obvious. Each time he was forced to put his weight upon his left foot it was plainly a painful thing to do, so that he progressed lurchingly.

"It might be from his fall; that's quite possible. Might be from a bullet wound; that's possible, too."

He did not know what to think. Yet he was glad to have made the discovery. It would be something of a relief to learn that it was Molinar and not Don Luis Alarcon who had been involved in the fracas at the stable in Nacional.

Yet it remained that it was Don Luis himself who entertained Bill Smith, hidden in his house—if it were Bill Smith. Of course, it was possible that a snuff-taking majordomo had led him astray into fantastic nonsense—

Going on to the stable he met Vega Alarcon coming out, looking very pretty and fresh in her bright little riding habit of olive green. She appeared to be too exclusively occupied with her own thoughts to notice anything about her—such an object, for instance, as Rapidan.

"Anyhow, *she* doesn't limp," he grunted as he went up into his saddle. "Wonder if Bill Smith does?—Let's go, Diamond.—I'm getting a little idea all my own. You and I are going to make a stab at straightening things out. To-night, old boy. All set? Let's go!"

CHAPTER XII

WATCH a man in his treatment of animals. There you have him with his guard down. He uses them as he would like to use human beings; as he serves his horse so would he serve his fellow man were he so placed that he might do so in safety. At least, so judged Rapidan.

Take Molinar: Vega Alarcon had outdone him, but, with things as they were, he could not strike her. Himself had lost whatever slight chance he held in the race, yet he could not admit it, could not blame himself. There remained the horse; though not his own, yet it was only a horse. It, in his infuriated brain, was the sole punishable cause of a Molinar being made a laughing stock, a Molinar resolved into a ridiculous figure dripping ditchwater. He would thank God with every blow that a horse could suffer like a man.

"If he is the bird I helped fly free at Nacional," grunted Rapidan disgustedly, "I made an almighty mess of an affair that was quite all right without my long-nosed interference.—*If* he was the man!—The deck's all cluttered up with *ifs!* Who started dealing this hand, any how?"

He gave Black Diamond the sign that he might have things all his own way; just a loosened rein, and Diamond went racing across the rolling hills like a great black arrow. His master brooded. Once he gave his nose a savage tweak. "Elephant-nose," he called himself. Hadn't he always said that what the world needed

most was more folks minding their own business. What affair of his was all this? What had he to do with a hold-up near Nacional, with a man lame in the left leg, with the master and mistress of Spanish Hacienda, with Molinar, with Bill Smith?

"It's because of that boy, Jim Terril," he answered himself, short off. "He's a good kid, a square kid, and they're on the high road to hang him. That's the why of the what, Diamond, old boy. And we'll interfere all we please and anywhere we please, just to see that they don't."

So into the scrap heap went an old theory. A theory, after all, is just a good horse so long as it pulls the load it's hitched to; let it get to kicking the load to pieces or lying down in the traces, the driver is free to turn it loose and harness a new horse more to his liking.

Rapidan meant to go straight on to his new ranch, the old Bill Smith place. He would have not over a dozen miles to drive and would be there by mid-afternoon. There he would stretch his legs until dusk; he might even have a nap that began to suggest itself as highly desirable. And then he and Black Diamond would head back over the hills to Spanish Hacienda.

"Maybe the old generalissimo at Alarcon's place takes snuff and maybe he doesn't," he informed Diamond. "I'd say that Don Luis has the eyes of a chronic liar if no worse; they stand between a man and the back of his head like a black curtain and no light comes through that he doesn't aim to have leak out. Bill Smith isn't dead and he wasn't burned or I've cracked under the strain. He's on the dodge and Blue Blood Alarcon, alias Don Pomposo, knows all about it. And I want to know!"

For always his thoughts came back to center on Jim Terril. The boy had been convicted and sentenced. Soon or late they'd get him; trust Jesse Law for that. It might be a day, a week, a month or ten years; Law would get Jim Terril and Jim Terril would hang. That is, if Bill Smith were allowed to get clean away.

And Alarcon knew that! Knew that if he succeeded in hiding Bill Smith he succeeded in hanging Jim Terril.—His daughter didn't know, though! At least she had been genuinely glad to learn that Rapidan had aided Terril to evade Law and his deputy, little mahogany Tipton.

One thing alone Rapidan held to be reasonably certain: Bill Smith, if he were now at Spanish Hacienda could not possibly think of taking his departure in broad daylight. The country was too open for that; he would be sure somewhere on his way to encounter some cowboy, and then how the news would circulate! It would zigzag across the country like chain lightning—Bill Smith alive after all and trying to lie low!

So Rapidan judged that he had ample time to move on, to appear to be living up to his old adage of concentrating on his own affairs, and still have an eye on Spanish Hacienda as night drew on. If Bill Smith got away now, Rapidan felt that the whole responsibility lay on his shoulders. For was he not voluntarily shouldering it? To be sure he could carry his news, which was nothing more than a good strong and very healthy suspicion, to Jesse Law. "I saw a hat at Alarcon's; it was Bill Smith's hat. And I heard a man sneeze. Alarcon said that it was his majordomo." Law, already regarding him with suspicious eyes, might wonder what game he was up to now, but would not be impressed by his story. No, Jesse Law was too thor-

oughly convinced of Bill Smith's murder to give the faintest credence to such a wild tale. Alarcon stood too high in public opinion for any ugly whispers of an unknown stranger to find a sympathetic ear.

Arrived at the cottonwoods where he had left his outfit, he broke camp swiftly. Marlborough and Agatha Bowen he saw sitting listlessly on their shady porch; he imagined that long ago they had broken all records of porch-sitting. They called to him to come to the house for a visit—"Mourning-bee, is the name for it," thought Rapidan—but he only waved to them and told them he had to be getting on home. "Home." He wondered what he had ahead of him. Well, a man could always trade one ranch for another, and in the ripeness of time he might find that "home." Here or elsewhere; the earth was good and wide.

He drove away, waving again to the disconsolate porch-sitters. They had received explicit enough orders to go but here they might be counted on to remain until some one came and hauled them away. He was glad to see the last of them. They distilled enough gloom to make their little valley reek with it. When he had crossed over the little tumbling hills and was back on the main road the sunshine seemed brighter about him, the world cleaner.

"Go 'long, little ponies," he sang out cheerily, with a crack from his long whip that was like a pistol shot. "Lift 'em up and put 'em down just a few more times, and we're *there!* Hi!"

It was a pleasant drive and he enjoyed it. Hot, but the dry southwestern heat to which he was pretty well inured. By daylight far-reaching stretches of earth revealed themselves generously. He had on one hand the low, rocky hills which made a natural boundary line

here to the Alarcon acres; on the other side a barren, thorny expanse of gray sandy soil. Here the desert began. Harsh and dry, the land of silence. Areas of clean sand, a sparse scattering of cactus-growth, smooth slight ridges sweeping on endlessly as they progressed deeper and deeper into the heart of the barrens; yonder, very far away, a tufted palm top. Water there? Perhaps. Perhaps deep down under the sand. The desert lands are full of mockery and lying promises. They resent intrusion. Like the rattlesnake, "Leave me alone and I leave you alone; take liberties with me and toy with death."

The Alarcon hills stood up like a magic wall between the kingdom of plenty and the empire of sterility. For the life blood of the earth is water; impervious strata under the sandy expanses covered and pressed back the water which, finding cracks and crevices in the Alarcon hills at last broke triumphantly forth in crystalline springs.

Rapidan jogged along, making what speed he could which for the most part was inconsiderable; the road was nothing to boast of, mere dim wheel tracks along the base of the hills and even the tracks vanished now and then in the grinding sand, and it was a matter of hours before he sighted the first fence. Here, no doubt, began his ranch. Well, the prospect was not particularly cheerful. Rocky hills on one side, arid acres on the other.

But now the road turned abruptly and within a quarter of a mile he was pulling up grade, climbing the hilly land. And ten minutes later on the crest he slammed on his brake and sat looking with eyes which grew brighter and brighter upon the view spread out before and below them—his new ranch. He whistled

softly. It was an eloquent little whistle; surprise was in it and a rich satisfaction.

"Bill Smith's an idiot!" he declared. "To let go a place like this—Why, I swapped the eye-teeth out of that gent! And I put him down as a cross between a fox and a shark. Why was he in such a hurry to let go?—And why," he pondered after a little, "didn't Alarcon buy him out?"

The property on which he looked—it was a mile wide and two miles long—was on the Alarcon side of the hills and thus in the same basin as Spanish Hacienda. It constituted a pleasantly situated valley, level floored save for placid looking, gentle knolls here and there; it was evidently well watered and in the folds of the hills were splendid groves of poplars. Down the middle of the valley ran a wavering line of green, willows with occasional taller trees marking the line of the creek. To be sure the creek at this season was for the most part a dry sun-blistered gravelly scar; but at irregular intervals there were glinting pools and all along he knew that the sweet water ran just under the surface.

He had entered upon his domain at the extreme southwestern corner and thus had the entire sweep of it before him. He saw the dim road wind down and out of the hills and to a crossing of the creek; it led on across the rolling floor of the valley, lost to sight now and then among the swells of earth or clumps of shady trees, and at last indicated where the house stood. The building he could make nothing of from here; it was fully a mile away and was hidden for the most part by the finest stand of cottonwoods at the headwaters of his creek. "Step along, ponies," he commanded eagerly. "We're going to like this place."

An air of desertion lay across the valley and was as insistent upon notice as the golden sunlight filling the spaces among the hills; no stock grazed here, no sound save of his own making disturbed the calm serenity, no dog barked, no bell tinkled and no wisp of smoke rose against the sky. So much the better, thought Rapidan; here was the canvas, here the colors and he'd create his own pictures after his own fashion. There is a good deal of the artist in every normal man, and the man who shapes him a home along one of the frontiers labors toward the accomplishment of an ideal, the materialization of a vision.

Even when he stopped his team at the edge of the grove he could make but little of the house itself, so was it hidden in its shady place. Curious to investigate, he forebore until he had unhitched and given their liberty to all his live stock, saving Black Diamond alone. His saddle horse he tethered with a sixty foot rope down by the creek. The other animals would not stray far and he had no present need of them. Oliver Cromwell was the first to go down for a good roll; Sir Clarion, the bantam, as proud as any Don Luis Alarcon, cocked an accusing eye at the high sun and then betook himself, with a hint of irritability, into the shade under the wagon. And Rapidan at last, with interested glances all about him, turned to the house.

A shady path led through the trees; it was cool here and very pleasant, the air soft and faintly fragrant. Rapidan sniffed as he strode along. Oranges, surely; roses, too. And for an uncertain instant his heart sank; this couldn't be the Bill Smith place after all! What had a man like that to do with rose bushes?

But there they were, truly enormous rose vines on old arbors that must have been twenty years old. A

small clearing about the house; a few oranges in fruit and blossom, looking thirsty yet rugged enough; a sprinkling of other fruits, peach and apple and pomegranate. And then the house itself: An old adobe of several rooms, sturdy and square and low, with deeply recessed windows and doors in the thick walls, with crumbling old red tiles.

"An old place; belonged long ago to some well-to-do Mexican; his hand, not Bill Smith's added rose and orange and pomegranate."

He went to the front door; it was barred from within. To a window, only to find it closed and fastened. The glass was dirty and cobwebby and he could see little of the dark interior. So he went on, seeking some ready entrance. There was a deep well in the back yard, a rusty leaking bucket dangling from a frazzled rope run through a pulley. There were many dead shrubs here, dead from the lack of water which was so close by. He came to a second door, tried it and went in.

Here was the kitchen, tidy enough since there was so little in it to make for untidiness, a large, cool room with heavy beamed ceiling and rude planked floor. The air was heavy and close so he opened all the windows before he went on to the next room. As he opened this door he noticed first of all a heavy scent of oranges, the fruit itself; he saw a heap of the yellow rinds on a chair by the bed. Then he saw the man, half lying, half sitting up in the darkest corner on the bed, hat pulled forward to hide his face. And, finally, he saw that in the man's hand was a heavy revolver trained at this moment on Rapidan in the doorway.

"Hello!" he said with a start. "Who are you and what the mischief are you up to?"

"So it's you, Rapidan?" The revolver dropped to the bed. "Hoped it would be. If it turned out to be Jesse Law or little Tipton, well I was going to shoot it out with them, that's all."

"Terril?" Rapidan came forward hastily. "What's wrong? What in the world are you doing here?—Hurt?"

Jim Terril shoved off his hat, relaxed and lay back.

"I didn't want to come back to roost on you," he said quickly. "I'll be hopping along pretty pronto. But I had to head in this way. The devil drives sometimes, you know," he concluded bitterly.

"Why, man, you're welcome enough, as far as that goes," Rapidan assured him heartily. "You know it. But it seemed a foolish thing, that's all.—Hurt?"

"Not so bad I can't get over it—if they give me a chance. But I was out of grub, too. I raided your oranges, first thing."

"Better tell me about it, hadn't you?" Rapidan urged him. "I've a notion they won't leave you alone long, here."

"Let 'em come ahead," Terril retorted, sullen and defiant and in the high mood for utter recklessness. "I'll get as many of them as they get of me, that's all."

Rapidan laughed at him, tipped the orange rinds to the floor and sat down at his side.

"Let's know first how bad your hurt is; then how it happened. And then we'll get busy figuring ahead."

Terril looked at him curiously.

"You're one square gent, I take it, Rapidan," he said.

"Hope so," Rapidan retorted. "And I'm sure one

cat for curiosity right now.—Got anything to smoke, first?"

"I haven't got a blasted thing on earth," grunted Terril, "except a cussed, nasty disposition."

Rapidan gave him "the makings." The boy made his cigarette with hands which he held steady to the purpose only with an obvious force of will. He looked almost as haggard as when Rapidan had first come upon him in the desert.

"Hungry, maybe?"

"Looks like I was turning into your star boarder—"

"Hold your horses a minute; I guess we won't have any visitors before we're ready for 'em. I'll go make us up some coffee and beans. I notice talk always keeps."

He brought a box of things from his wagon and busied himself in the kitchen. He wanted Jim Terril's story, but he wanted to do a bit of thinking himself before he had it. Here, under his own roof he had the man whom the law thought that it wanted; down yonder, at Spanish Hacienda, was the man it really did want. And Rapidan was the only man on earth who knew both these things. Yes, he'd do his own thinking and not too much talking until he saw daylight.

He put his head in through the door to say with a chuckle:

"If it turns out, old kid, that you've got a bullet hole in your left leg, I'm going to fork my best running horse and streak for Tierra del Fuego!"

"On your way then," said Terril wonderingly. "Left leg it is!"

CHAPTER XIII

"It all goes to show," said Rapidan as he put coffee, beans and toppling stack of hot-cakes on the kitchen table, "that nothing makes any difference."

"Sounds cheerful," said Terril.

He had dragged himself from the adjoining room and drew a chair along with him.

"Feed yourself," he was invited. "I'm joining you. And, when you feel like it, you can spill the tale."

"Good coffee you make. I hadn't forgotten it."

"You bet it's good. Coffee's a day-starter. The better the coffee, the better the day."

"Look here, Rapidan—I say, where'd you ever get a name like that anyway?"

"The coffee's bucking you up already!—The name? What's in a name, some folks ask. A whale of a lot, some other folks say. Rapidan is a first rate name; name of a river in Virginia. And, incidentally, it's one of my several cognomens. I rattled the lot off for you once: Julian Randolph Prentiss Worthington James Daniel Rapidan—and, would you believe it, there's even one more yet that I held out on you! It comes at the end after all those high hurdles, and," he added whimsically, "most generally I break down just before I get to it."

Speculation, quick suspicion and incredulity ran their little gamut in Jim Terril's eyes.

"Dropping a name and going in for another," he said, hesitating, "generally means—Oh, pshaw! You're not on the dodge yourself, are you?"

"Something very much like that," was the cool rejoinder. "And now that you're feeling chatty, tell me what happened."

Terril's face darkened.

"It's that cussed bounty they slapped on my hide! I'm free wild game for any man now and it's wide open season. When I cut loose from you back there at Honeycutt's I knew where I was going. But I didn't draw any sort of luck from the first crack.—I've lamed your horse for you, Rapidan."

"Go 'head."

"Nothing bad. I was sorry about it. Put his foot in a squirrel hole and got a sprain. Well, that made a difference. I turned out of my way and headed up into the Blue Smokes over yonder." Rapidan lifted his brows interrogatively and Terril explained: "String of mountains you can see from outside, off to the north. I knew a man I thought I could count on up yonder; thought I'd leave your horse and get one from him. Yes, I thought he was on the level—but I guess he needed the bounty money more'n he needed a good night's sleep. Well, that's his business. But I'll bet he's sorry now he started anything."

Rapidan, watching him all the while keenly and shrewdly, saw one thing very clearly: Here was a devil-may-care young fellow, naturally sunny and straight and full of the leaping joy of life, in just the right mood to rush along now with the currents which had swept his feet out from under him; all ready to be made over. And what a tragic marring there would be in that re-making! They had beaten his soul into a white-hot, malleable, shapeless thing that now might be stamped into an ugly shape. He had changed sig-

nally in a single day; he was sullen, morose, bitter. Of such material has many a southwestern outlaw been made. His world sought to down him; he fought back, a deal of sheer manhood being packed into his boyishness. They had put a price on his head like the bounty on a coyote, and like a coyote he snarled at any hand menacing him. They had branded him a murderer; they were on the high road to make a murderer of him. If they had not already succeeded—

"Let's have it all," said Rapidan quietly. "The man you thought you could count on double-crossed you, eh?"

"He has a little stock ranch up in the Blue Smokes. He had stood my friend during the trial. It didn't cost him anything and there wasn't anything to be made then by knifing me. So I dropped in on him. His eyes looked straight enough, and friendly. Sure, he'd give me a leg on my journey. Didn't have much to eat in his shack, he said, but if I'd squat and make a meal off my own grub he's see what he could do. Went out to round up some horses, that's what he said. I opened up the package you gave me; spotted the greenback, first of all." The sullen eyes cleared for an instant only as he lifted them swiftly to Rapidan's face. "That was pretty decent of you, old timer."

"And when he came back?" he was prompted.

"He'd scared up two more men instead of a saddle horse. Sheep men that were handy. I saw 'em just as I was starting to eat. So I came away and didn't get more than a mouthful. It was like this: I happened just by luck to see outside how a shadow moved behind the shack. There wasn't a sound. Somebody going creepy-mousy style. That was plenty, you bet, to bring

me rarin' up on my hind legs. Then I glimpsed the three of them, two with guns, one with a pick handle. Once they saw I was on the job and was heeled, they tried to shoot it out with me.—Me, I'm ready for any of that kind!" He flared up venomously, quick lights flickering in his blood-shot eyes. Just then he looked to be gripped by a rising fever, on the edge of delirium.

"And then—?"

"We shot it out. They looked scared from the jump; they're low-life, those skunks. One of them seared my leg for me, mostly accident, too. But I got him pronto and he dropped his gun and howled. And I got number two, and the man with the pick handle threw it as far as he could and lifted his hands until he looked ten feet high!" His dry nervous laugh ended in a snort of contempt.

"Kill anybody?" asked Rapidan, quite as though he felt not the least anxiety about the answer.

Terril shook his head a shade regretfully.

"I drove 'em into a little log house where he keeps his tools and stuff. I locked 'em in, went and got a horse—I hated to leave your horse there, but I had to —put your saddle and bridle on it and here I am. Maybe they're out by now and maybe they ain't. I'm not worrying much."

"Either man very badly shot up?"

"Don't know. 'Fraid not. Hope so."

"Well," said Rapidan. "Well." And presently, "Dig into the beans, kid. And there's more coffee coming up."

"You're a funny guy," muttered young Terril.

"Think so?"

"Sure are." He laughed again, his almost hysterical laughter. "If you happened to be normal, guess

you'd hammer me over the head and go get the bounty."

Rapidan's smile that was so like the switching on of a glowing inner light, flashed across his lean brown face.

"May do that some time," he said curiously. "Remember, I'm warning you. If I ever do cart you off to jail, don't say I didn't serve notice on you."

"Mean that?" cried Terril sharply.

Rapidan laughed.

"Not to-day, anyhow. Now, let's see the leg."

"It's nothing. Wouldn't have bothered at all, if I hadn't been fagged to begin with and sort of hard-ridden and crazy for sleep and all that, with a hungry feeling slapped on for full measure."

"Just the same old Doc Rapidan will take a peep at it; I've got a regular first class first aid kit in the wagon, iodine, soap and butcherknife. And while I operate on you, you can go 'head and tell me some more. Where's the horse you rode here?"

"Picketed in the little coulee back of the house."

"I'll go out and turn it loose; it will find its way home in time and won't tell any stories. I've got plenty horses."

"I've used one up on you already—"

"When I get time I'll go get him back. And if it's only a sprain it will be all right.—So you had to go and get shot in the left leg! Ever know a man to get drilled in the right one?"

"What's so funny about it? You said something a while ago about that."

"There was a hold-up near Nacional. The hold-up man, coming mighty close to being gathered in, got off with a game left leg.—You didn't happen to sneak

down that way, after I left you at Honeycutt's, did you? And rob the Esperanza paymaster, and get back to Honeycutt's before I did?"

"Not that I remember," grunted Terril.

Terril's wound, as he had said, was slight; a small caliber bullet had hardly more than creased his thigh. Yet it looked raw and ugly from chafing, and required cleansing and a protective bandage. Rapidan poured his iodine generously and out of the corner of his eye watched how the boy set his teeth until he bit his cigarette in two, and otherwise appeared indifferent.

"No, I guess you weren't in Nacional or you'd remember," said Rapidan. "But if Jesse Law gets his hooks into you, how's he to know? He happens to be looking for an *hombre* with a fresh wound in the left leg, just about like yours!"

Terril could shrug with perfect unconcern.

"When they've got a man already headed to the gallows, what difference if they trump up a few more charges against him? Can't hang a man twice, you know."

"They're not going to hang you at all, kid," Rapidan told him with such cool assurance that Terril straightened up with a gasp as for air—but slumped again. "So it does make a difference how many new things they pile up against you. Not even a charge of horse stealing is to stand on the books against you. That's why I want your borrowed cayuse from the Blue Smokes to trot back along home."

Terril plainly failed to follow him.

"I tell you, Rapidan, when they've got a man slated to swing—"

"I've never asked you straight out," Rapidan cut

in. "I'm going to now: You didn't do for Bill Smith, by any chance, did you?"

"No. Wish I had, though!" More glowering than ever grew the savage eyes. "Got there too late, that's all."

"And of course," came the next question, very casually, as though it were of minor importance, "you haven't the least idea who got there ahead of you?"

"But I have!" There was eager exultation in his exclamation. "I know as well as if I'd been there! By the way the job was done."

"Who do you think it was?"

Terril hesitated. He fell to staring at Rapidan as though he would read to the very bottom of his soul.

"They asked me that in court," he said, still hesitating. "I told the judge three things: I said I didn't do it. I said I knew who did and they couldn't pull it out of me with a twenty mule team. And I said I was dam' glad he did it, too."

"Nice little speech to make the court," grinned Rapidan. "Great way to get clear.—Now, kid, listen to me: I'm for you and if you've got any sense you know it. You're looking at me right now as if you were wondering if I was playing straight or crooked with you. It's strictly up to you to make up your mind. If when you decide you want to come clean with all you know when I ask you, I can help you. If you're making up your mind that you can't trust me, that's your business. I'll give you a horse and my blessing, and you can play your game your way. Think it over."

All Terril's hesitation vanished before the last word.

"I didn't answer that question," he said simply, "because it was squealing on another man, Rapidan."

"You've got to save yourself—"

The dark young head shook doggedly.

"Not to get that other man in bad," he said with decision.

Rapidan went to the door and stood looking out into the neglected yard. Yes, everything remained square on his shoulders and the burden was piling up. Just what to do with this raw-nerved fellow?—The sheriff would not be long in dropping in here; he had an eye on Rapidan and would know that at any time Rapidan's movements might lead him to Jim Terril.—Sooner or later they'd run the boy down, and he would shoot it out as he promised; if not killed himself he'd kill somebody, and then his last hope was gone. Innocently enough, Jesse Law was hounding him straight into the hangman's noose.—And Bill Smith, the cause of it all, was right now within a stiff hour's ride. Not that Terril was to know! He'd go for his gun, his horse and Bill Smith, one, two, three; like that!—But he ought to know. The knowledge would put hope in him. But not now, not in his present mood.

Slowly he returned to Terril, saying quietly:

"I've the hunch, young Wild Bill, that I can save you from all the misery that seems stacked up in front of you; show you the way not only to escape but to be cleared of the charge on which you were convicted—"

"No. I know what you mean. But I'm not going to get the other man in bad, I tell you."

"I'm not asking you to," came the sharp rejoinder. "Pal of yours no doubt. Well, I never asked a man to double his pal yet. I don't mean that. What I do mean is that we can show you didn't kill Bill Smith—and not show up anybody who did."

"If you can do that—"

"If you'll answer my questions. Not otherwise."

"Well—fire away."

"I want your whole story: Why you wanted to do for Bill Smith; why somebody else wanted the same thing. What had happened before to start the rumpus. And I've got to know who the man was that you think killed him."

"But, man, can't you see—"

"You bet I can see. A lot that you don't even guess. You think you know who killed Bill Smith; didn't see it done, did you?"

"No."

"The man who you think did it hasn't told you that he did do it, has he?"

"No. But just the same—"

"I'll bet you haven't even seen him since the thing was done!"

"What if I haven't? I know—"

"You don't know. All you know is how to keep your mouth shut at the wrong time. If you'd told everything you did know and thought you knew at the trial, you'd be a free man right now. You haven't got as much horse sense, Jim Terril, as a sheep."

"I'm not going to squeal, I tell you—"

"To go on with what you don't know: You don't know where the man is that got to Bill Smith first. You don't know what happened; you don't know—anything! And I do!"

"You've seen Bud!" cried Terril, all eagerness.

"Bud, eh?—Not, by any chance—your brother?"

"No!" exclaimed Terril quickly. Too quickly.

"So it's Bud you're trying to shield? Your brother! —You poor kid," muttered Rapidan.

Terril's eyes looked hot with fever.

"It wasn't my brother; it wasn't Bud."

"Oh, yes, it was—or rather, you think it was. What now if I give you my word—Hold on to your chair and listen—that it wasn't Bud at all that did the ugly bit of business? That's on the level, Jim Terril. Think it over."

Terril appeared dumbfounded. Slowly a saner look dawned in his weary eyes. For the first time he straightened and filled his lungs deep; hope rushed along with the air into them.

"All right, I'll spill you the yarn." But even now he hesitated. His eyes hardened again and he rapped out, "If you double-cross me on this, Rapidan, I'll smash down all the bars of hell to come back and get you!"

"Sure you would. And nobody to blame you. Now, speak up."

"All right. Slip me a cup of water, will you? You can reach it easier'n I can. Well, I'll make it short and snappy.—There were three of us, brothers. We always chummed up more'n most brothers; ran away from home when we were little kids and always stuck together. Favored Texas, along the border—and sometimes got in a little trouble."

"You were the youngest?"

"Yes. Oldest was Jerry. He's dead now. Gerlack killed him."

"Gerlack?"

"Yes. Hefty Gerlack his name was back in Texas. Changed it later—to Bill Smith. I knew and Bud knew. That was about seven years ago. Jerry had got to running with Gerlack, and we all knew Gerlack was no good. He had breezed in not long before from somewhere below the border, and he was always watching out of the ends of his eyes, like somebody was after

him. Jerry was a good kid, but kind of wild, you know. Gerlack was older and Jerry cottoned to him and followed his lead. There was a mix-up and some trouble. And pretty soon Jerry found out that Gerlack's one favorite pastime was double-crossing a pal, so long as he stood to turn a penny that way. And he found out some more; just what it was, I don't know. What it was that Gerlack was always looking over his shoulder about, Bud and I think. Well, they had a row and Gerlack pulled the dirtiest trick a man ever got away with—Only," he ended with a flash of the eyes, "he didn't get away with it too long, since Bud just served him the same medicine!

"What Gerlack did was get my brother Jerry off alone, at Gerlack's place in the hills. He murdered him in cold blood, left him in the house, and burned the house down. It was a long time before Bud and I came to understand the play. What everybody thought was that it was Gerlack himself that was killed and burned! All he had to do was to skip in the dark, and lie low—and the law down there's hunting poor Jerry yet, to hang him for it."

Rapidan had to hide his eyes a moment lest Terril see and read the swift knowledge that leapt into them. What Gerlack had done seven years ago in Texas, he had simply repeated here! And Jim Terril had not yet the vaguest suspicion that it had been his brother Bud's charred body, and not Bill Smith-Gerlack's, that had been found here in the burned shed.—And then only the full grim horror of it all burst upon Rapidan: Terril, trying to shield his brother Bud, was actually shielding Smith-Gerlack! And Jim Terril, while Smith-Gerlack ran free, was on the verge of hanging for his own brother's murder!

"Yes, sir," said Jim Terril, with bitter satisfaction, "Bud caught up with him and handed him the same thing he'd handed poor Jerry. And then, of course, Bud skipped out. He had tried to keep it all from me; he didn't know how much I knew. And, for my part, I wanted to beat him to it. So, when he vamoosed, of course he couldn't tell that I might get in bad for what he'd done.—And, I guess he's skipped so fast and so far that he's never heard a word of what happened since."

"Yes," said Rapidan gravely, "He's skipped too far for that, I reckon."

"But," and a shadow of mystification swept over Terril's tense face, "you've seen Bud? Or you know something about him?"

"I'll tell you all I know—pretty soon. We've got to cut our blab-party short; this is no place for you to stay. Is there any place you know where you can hide out for a little while? Maybe a day, maybe ten? And where I can look you up if something happens which I hope is going to happen?"

"There are a dozen places I know, right here on your ranch, where I could hole up for a month and they'd never nose me out—unless they used dogs. But maybe you want me to drift along?"

"I want you where I can get at you, day or night. We'll go out in a minute and you'll show me your place. I want to be able to signal you, too; high sign if the coast is clear or if any one is poking about.—I've got a phonograph; do you know 'The Campbells Are Coming?' All right. If you hear it playing it means for you to come ahead, everything's all right. And I've got—let's see—'Dixie.' Of course you know that. Playing Dixie means lie low. Got it?"

"Sure have," said Terril. "Now maybe we'd better step."

"Right away. I've got a little ride to make myself just as soon as the cool of the evening comes. But there's a question or two left that I want to fire at you. I've wanted to know all along how you got away from Jesse Law in the first place."

A puzzled look filled the boy's eyes.

"That was funny," he said. And all of a sudden his eyes lighted up most strangely and he exclaimed excitedly: "It was you!"

Rapidan, clearly mystified, demanded:

"What are you driving at?"

"The man that helped me go free! The first time."

"Don't know a thing about it, Jim. Tell me."

"Well, I never understood. Little Tipton and another deputy were taking me over to the railroad. Some man on horseback, with a rag over his face, pops up and shoves a double barrelled shot gun into the party. Night it was, just enough light to see the gun. And he never opened his face, either. You could just feel he meant business. Tipton and the other deputy never had a chance. There was a horse ready for me and I didn't stop to ask any questions. I thought the other guy was following me. I thought maybe it was Bud. But I don't know any more than that."

"Say, kid," drawled Rapidan, "you tote more little surprise packages around with you than any man I know! Here's a new one! Some man takes a nice tall chance of getting himself shot all to pieces, sets you loose, and flies off like an old witch on a broom-stick, without ever a word! Who do you suppose?"

"I tell you I thought it might be Bud—"

"It wasn't Bud."

"Then I give up. Haven't the faintest idea. I'd sure like to know."

"So would I!—"

Again the impulse came strong upon Rapidan to tell the boy what he did know; that Bill Smith, or Gerlack, was alive and close at hand. Think what it would mean to young Terril; think how the hope would come rushing back into him!—But then Terril would know the rest, as well as Rapidan knew it: That Gerlack had killed Bud, too! What force on earth would then hold the boy back from murder?

So Rapidan said shortly:

"Come ahead. We'll go look at your hiding place. I'll get something to eat out to you later on. Better take a jug of water, though. And you'll want the makings; here they are."

As they went out among the cottonwoods, Rapidan first reconnoitering, they fell silent. Rapidan already grew impatient for the coming of dusk. He began to see that the answers to many questions might be had only at Spanish Hacienda.

CHAPTER XIV

JUST at a time when Rapidan would have been more grateful to any man for his absence than for his presence, Barfoot rode up. The sun was near setting; dusk would be abroad over the land in a few minutes, and Rapidan meant to be at Spanish Hacienda with the first true dark. Therefore there was little enough of welcome in the questioning eyes he turned toward his visitor.

"Glad I found you at home," said Barfoot in that deeply sonorous voice of his that was so like far off, reverberating thunder.

Rapidan, silently allowing him an exclusive possession of all gladness in the matter, watched him dismount heavily, tie his horse to a sapling and come toward the house. Barfoot's bearish gait, marked with a catch, a lurch and a roll due to his shorter leg, evoked Rapidan's first remark, one however addressed strictly to himself: "Thanks be, here's one man whose stuttering is done with the right foot, not with the left!" But his thoughts hurried off after other matters; first of all, to what was due this call of Barfoot's? Had it anything to do with Jim Terril? And were Jesse Law and little Tipton somewhere in the offing?

Barfoot mopped his large face with a flaming big bandana.

"I've put in a day, believe me, Rapidan," he said wearily, and slumped down on the door step. "Take a man my size, tie him in the saddle for about a hundred miles, and even a hard plank feels good."

Rapidan's eyes drifted to the tethered horse; it

sagged wearily, nose almost touching the ground; now and then its body swelled visibly to a long sigh as the animal stirred a little, easing a leg at the time by shifting its weight to the other three.

"Well, what do you think I can do for you?" asked Rapidan coolly, though already he thought that he knew.

Barfoot dropped back against the side of the house and fanned himself weakly with his hat.

"Look at me—and then ask that! You can undress me and put me to bed; you can bring me something to eat, anything. And you can let me sleep. Just tuck me in, Christian friend, and let me slumber. And you won't have to creep around in your sock-feet, for fear of waking me, either."

Rapidan looked down on the large, finely shaped head with its thin thatch of iron gray hair, and wondered what thoughts were clicking away inside it. Barfoot was physically tired, on the ragged edge of exhaustion; yet his brain remained active enough. Rapidan answered curtly:

"Just got here this afternoon, you know, and am hardly ready yet to take in boarders."

"You can't boot a man off the ranch though," Barfoot reminded him. "Not this time of day, anyway, with the man dog-tired, his horse done up, both of 'em starved—and no place to go."

"It's not so far to Spanish Hacienda—"

"Those stately portals," said Barfoot dejectedly, "clang shut in the face of the Nacional lawyer. The Alarcons and I are not what you'd call boon companions. Moreover, they're entertaining enough company without me, what with an *hombre* named Molinar and Jesse Law and Tipton—"

"Law, you say? He's there?"

His voice quickened. The sheriff in the same house with Bill Smith-Gerlack! Alarcon would be having his hands full to-night!

Rapidan was right when he felt that Barfoot, though jaded in the body was alert enough of his wits. He was quick to mark Rapidan's note of interest, and rejoined after the fashion of one who clinches an argument:

"You'll stake me to my board and keep to-night, and I'll pay you back with the news. You're interested in Law's doings, I notice. And, for full measure, I'll top off with something that interests you even more; I'll tip you off the latest about Terril."

Rapidan reflected. He saw immediately that he would have to put Barfoot up for the night, or most positively awaken that gentleman's suspicions to such an extent that they'd never so much as doze again until they had their answers to all questions. And he was keenly interested in learning what Barfoot knew, or thought that he knew, of Terril's actions.

"All right," acquiesced Rapidan, and prayed inwardly that Barfoot might prove a heavy sleeper and of a mind for an early bed. "Step inside. I'll be with you in two shakes; I'm just bringing in a few things from my wagon."

He made three or four round trips with odds and ends for the house, among them his phonograph. All the while Barfoot was lying flat on his back upon the bed occupied a little while ago by Jim Terril.

"Like music?" asked Rapidan.

"Like beans better," returned Barfoot.

But already Rapidan had the record spinning; "Dixie" rendered rousingly by a brass band might inform Terril that he was to lie low. And Rapidan went

hastily about preparing some sort of quick and satisfying meal for his unwelcome guest.

"Now," he called from the kitchen, when the brass band had won to an end, "let's have all the scandalmongering you've got seething in you. What about Law and Tipton; and what about the boy outlaw?"

Barfoot sniffed warm fragrances and roused himself with a hollow groan.

"Let me eat first—"

"As it happens," he was informed, "I'm just about to leave you here to run the ranch a while. I'll glean your news first, if you don't mind, and then toddle along."

"Where to?" queried Barfoot quickly.

"Well," drawled Rapidan, "that's telling! I haven't seen much of my ranch yet, you'll understand; I might be taking a candle and going out to look it over.—Or I might be making a call on my neighbors. Who can tell?"

"I noticed you sizing up the girl this morning," said Barfoot, lowering his bulk into a chair and gathering in the beans and crackers and cheese, arranging them cheek-by-jowl and handy with his plate. "No use, Mr. Rapidan, if you're thinking of sparking her. She'd see seven feet over your head. They say that that dirty greaser, Fernando Molinar, is the only man hereabouts tall enough to catch her eye.—Tall by way of standing on the shoulders of his ancestors, you know."

"Thanks for the warning," said Rapidan. "Now your gossip."

Barfoot's style of pandering to the delights of appetite was fascinating, if not beautiful. He plied knife and fork vigorously, he filled a very large, oratorical

mouth amazingly full, yet he managed to talk straight along and intelligibly all the while.

Law and Tipton had been scouting around all day for Jim Terril. They fully believed that he was not far away; they had not believed for a minute Rapidan's tale of Terril leaving him back at Honeycutt's; the evidence of the double-tree where a single-tree should have been, was not to be overlooked by either of them.

"And I tell you, Rapidan," advised Barfoot, "that any time you want to put one across on little Tipton, you got to look to details. If you wanted them to think Terril took one of your horses back at Honeycutt's you should have thought of hooking on the single-tree."

How little one knew how the dice were going to fall until they were poured out of the cup; how little one could tell of the face of a card by staring at its back all day; and how little one could know what lay just about the first bend in a new road! Dice and cards and a new road—life itself. Rapidan had made the double-tree lie for him and it had done its part well; it had said, "Terril came with us this far." And here, now, came Terril, sure enough!

"Spin along," said Rapidan shortly.

Barfoot continued: Law and Tipton, questing high and low, back and forth all day, had allowed him to trail along. Just why had he been of a mind to wear himself out, following those lean, hard devils? Wasn't the man they hunted Barfoot's former client? Well, no matter about that. The three had ridden hard and had ridden far. And to-night Law and Tipton, being on friendly terms with the grand folk at Spanish Hacienda, would dine there and sleep there—while Barfoot slept in the fields or fared further on.

"Very good," said Rapidan. "Now the rest of your news, about Terril?"

"Haven't seen him, have you?" asked the other sharply, sharp as to voice and piercingly sharp as to eyes.

"Want me to answer a question like that?" snorted Rapidan.

"No; course not. There'd be the same answer if you'd seen him or if you hadn't." Barfoot lowered his eyes to the table and set them roving like hungry wolves. "Guess you haven't, though; he'd be a fool, sure enough, to head in here. Well, this is what we learned. Terril, on leaving you, made a bee-line for the Blue Smokes. Showed up there at the ranch of a no-'count rancher, named Pete Bates. Bates saw a chance to make just about one thousand more dollars than he ever had before, all at one time, and not having the stomach to tie into Terril single-handed, got a couple of sheep men close by to come and help him. Terril was too quick with them, I guess, and beat them to the draw. Anyway he drilled two of them, locked the three up in a barn, grabbed a horse and drifted out of there."

"The Blue Smokes are quite a way from here," suggested Rapidan. "How'd you hear?"

"About thirty miles as a horse lopes. We heard from Pete Bates himself, and in a nasty temper he was. He stopped just enough of Terril's lead to stir him up. What he says is that they broke out of the barn and saw the horse Terril had left behind—your horse, I guess it was—and guessed he had taken a horse of Bates'. They sent one of the sheep men that wasn't hurt scrambling up to a sort of lookout, top of the big mountain that hangs over Bates' place. And when

he came down, he swore he had seen a man riding hell-for-leather, so far off he couldn't hardly be sure it was a man; and he was heading south. Which means this general direction. And there you are."

Rapidan appeared to be pondering what Barfoot had told him; in reality his thoughts darted swiftly in many directions.

"It hardly seems the thing for Terril to do, does it?" he asked after a while. "To turn back this way?"

"At first, no. But when you think, yes. He'd know that Bates would report him; he'd know they'd look for him to crowd on north. He'd have hard going and slow; he'd soon run into the land that's tapped by a telegraph line. Telegraph and telephone wires, my dear sir, constitute the biggest net man ever invented to catch criminals. No; having fluked at getting by the Bates place, he'd half lose heart and half catch his breath and he'd come streaking back this way. And, by the way, if you don't happen to know it," and again Barfoot regarded him piercingly, "it is thought by some, Law included, that Jim Terril has friends hereabouts that wouldn't sell him."

"Meaning me?"

"N-o. No. I'm not sure about you, Mr. Rapidan. Meaning the Alarcons. They openly stood by Terril during the trial; they said they didn't believe he ought to be convicted when he was convicted. Now Law keeps his mouth shut, which is all right as far as I am concerned. But he can't quite hide everything from me. No man can, my friend. I haven't any X-ray attachment to my eyes either; but I've got a tolerably foxy brain. And—to pay you full measure for your beans—it's my hunch that Jesse Law didn't just happen, accidentally, to hit Alarcon's place about time to

pull off saddle. There'd be stranger things than Jim Terril being holed up at Spanish Hacienda right now, on his way to the border."

Rapidan allowed himself the luxury of a soft whistle—and let Barfoot's foxy brain make what it could of that! Let it leap to any amazing suspicion, it was going to fall far short of the amazing truth, a situation in which the sheriff looked for Jim Terril where Smith-Gerlack lay hidden! If this were true, all that Barfoot told him, everything might come out right and with a rush.

He was regarding the matter, of course, from Jim Terril's point of view. Not from Smith-Gerlack's. And not from Don Luis Alarcon's. If Jesse Law found Bill Smith in Alarcon's home, there would be an accounting demanded! There are certain conspiracies which the law does not condone; a man hiding a supposed murdered man while the man who was supposed to be the real murderer was being hunted down with a price on his head and the gallows waiting for him—here was a condition which the law, once it knew, would regard with peculiar sternness. What on earth was Don Luis Alarcon thinking of?

Well, thought Rapidan, Barfoot had earned his beans. It was well to know all this; nor was there any longer the frantic haste to be at Spanish Hacienda with the first moments of darkness. With Law and Tipton in the house and both hawk-eyed for Jim Terril, there was going to be small likelihood of Hefty Gerlack, alias Bill Smith, slipping away. He would lie low until they were gone; or, in any case, he would wait for a later hour and a slackening of vigilance. Rapidan sat on the edge of the table and idly watched the toe of his boot, swinging back and forth.

"No longer in the big hurry?" observed Barfoot. "Maybe you won't go lady-killing after all to-night, seeing your good pal Jesse Law is there before you!"

"Quien sabe?" drawled Rapidan.

"Suit me fine. I'll be glad of your company while I finish my supper and while I have a smoke before trundling off to about fifteen hours sleep. I want a talk with you, anyway."

"About what?"

"About me, first. Then about you."

"And I'm thinking about your horse outside. Going to let the poor brute hang there all night?"

Barfoot half rose from his chair and looked ashamed.

"So help me, Rapidan, I'd clean forgotten the horse! I'll go out right now and unsaddle."

"Finish your supper. I'll do it for you."

He went out and Barfoot relapsed with a sigh into his chair and began the final attack upon his victuals. Rapidan, passing a window, glanced in at him; Barfoot, head down, was eating voraciously.

Ten minutes later, when Rapidan returned, his guest was sitting back against the wall, filling a black, rank pipe.

"About me, first," continued Barfoot, quite as though there had been no interruption. "I've got money salted away, a good deal of it in high grade securities. Inside two or three years I'm going to retire. Then I'll buy me a little home up in Albuquerque, join the golf club, raise a flower garden and write my monograph on the ideational processes of the lexicographical brain.—Do not fall into the error, Mr. Rapidan, of judging my powers of expression from the level vocabulary of my casual chatter. In the court

room I hurl thunderbolts; on the written page I become graceful, supple, brilliant, and am to be compared with the pen in my hand to an accomplished master of the rapier." He caught his lower lip between thumb and forefinger, pulled it outward and downward, and let it snap back into place with its soft "plup."

"I tell you of my ambitions," said Barfoot, "that you may the better understand my present situation, as resolved in my own mind. For whatever time is necessary, a couple of years or so, I am merely adding to my capital. As soon as I have rounded it out to the desired total, off I hie me to Albuquerque. In short, it is to gather money that I tarry here. And, finally, I'll take my money wherever and however I can get it."

"Very nice," said Rapidan. "Wherever and however you can get it. And hang all considerations by the way. Ethical and otherwise."

"Exactly."

"And so if you could come by a thousand dollars offered for the apprehension of Jim Terril, you'd gather it in?"

"Exactly."

"Even though he was your client?"

"Even so. He is not my client now, you understand. Rather, he might be considered, like a mad dog, a menace to public safety."

It was Rapidan's turn to say, "Exactly," which he did, drily enough.

"Nothing like frankness, to get ahead, is there?" rumbled Barfoot complacently. "I progress. I'd take the money from you, were you to offer it." Rapidan, regarding him somewhat critically, said nothing, and

Barfoot went on: "First, I'll split with you fairly, fifty-fifty, on the Terril reward; I've felt right along that you were out for it, whole-hog. Well, think it over. Next, I'll take money from you for keeping my mouth shut and my thoughts still about a certain other matter."

Rapidan continued to regard him coolly, making no rejoinder. So Barfoot, with his fat shrug, resumed.

"You wanted a rifle you saw in my room; I let you take it. You ought to have known enough to stick it out of sight somewhere, but you put it, as Poe's man did the letter, in full sight. For all Mr. Poe's theorizing on the subject, that sort of thing simply doesn't work. Little Tipton saw it; so did Law!"

"Well?" snapped Rapidan at last, with just the faintest narrowing of his eyes.

"They know just about one half as much as I do, and they can guess about a twentieth part of what I can figure out. They are patient men and they'll wait and watch. I come right straight out and bargain with you."

"Blackmail?"

"That's the name for it."

A queer smile touched Rapidan's lips; let Barfoot's foxy brain make what it could of that, too!

"There was a man in my office once," said Barfoot chattily. "Happened to blow in and happened to spot that gun, just about the same as you did. He made no bones about looking it over, lock, stock and barrel. Then he wanted to know who the man was that owned it, and where he was. Of course I was willing to oblige but—I've told you how I'm stacking up a snug little capital, so that I can get along on the interest while devoting my remaining years to a congenial task. So I

told him I could probably get him his information, given a bit of time and expense money. Long story cut short, he paid me five hundred dollars."

"And you could tell him just exactly nothing?"

"Not so. I gave him full value. The rifle was found in a saloon in Nacional after a pretty bad fracas. The man who owned it shot two men before they gathered him in. Retained me, but went to the pen just the same. Some of my clients do," he regretted sighfully, "but it's as often their own fault as mine."

"And you sold this knowledge to the—the investigating gentleman? And collected five hundred? He must have been flush, I'd say, Barfoot!"

"Must have been. A gum-shoe, I put him down, with a fat expense account. Well, I'd figured all along that he found his man in the pen, as I've never seen him since. But, now that you come along and take a fancy to the rifle, I begin to wonder! It might be, you know, that you are the man he was looking for!"

"Might. Might not."

"Sure. Those are the chances I take. I could find out, of course, by looking him up. But the easier way was to come to you.—I'd rather do you a kindness than him. And besides, the man on the dodge generally pays better than the man tagging him."

Rapidan looked at his watch.

"I'll be travelling along now," he said.

"Sure." Barfoot yawned luxuriously. "Think it over and we can chat about it in the morning. Night, Mr. Rapidan."

Rapidan, leaving the house, went through the front room and took time to slip one of his phonograph records out of sight; little chance of Barfoot treating himself to a good-night tune, but it was just as well if

"The Campbells Are Coming" was where he'd not chance on it. Then he went to his wagon and took an old Colt forty-five revolver from a box.

It was dark enough now for him to do something which Barfoot's arrival had postponed. There was the horse which Jim Terril had ridden here from the Blue Smokes, hidden in the mouth of the cañon nearby. It was to be turned loose, started at a run toward its home—

"No," said Rapidan sharply. "There's another way, a better way! You're in the game now, Blue Smokes pony, and you're going to play your part!"

He hurried for Black Diamond, then rode, first of all, into the wooded cañon.

CHAPTER XV

RAPIDAN dismounted in the field across which earlier in the day he had watched Vega Alarcon race with Molinar. He dropped Black Diamond's reins to the ground; Diamond would wait here for him. Leading the horse that Terril had ridden from the Blue Smokes, he went forward through the dark, approaching the gate in the fence where Molinar had come by his fall.

The night was starry and clear, but a dark object moving with a degree of silence was not likely to attract attention. The led horse's hoofs made little sound on the turf. Rapidan paused at the gate. The house before him showed many windows yellow with the lights within. Doors, too, stood open to the cool of early evening. Long lanes of light lay across the walled-in garden. Now and then voices, raised slightly, floated out to him.

He looked toward the stable. It was darker there, yet there, too, a light burned. The young Mexican of the boots and hat, no doubt, lolled there yet, ready to receive a chance visitor's mount or to saddle at the command of the master. He had a room there, perhaps; Don Luis had fine horses and would be likely to have his stable locked at night, and a man at hand upon need.

The stable yard, extending between the stable itself and the adobe wall girdling the flower garden, was empty. Rapidan investigated all shadowy places suspiciously before he opened the gate. Were both Law and Tipton inside? Or were they managing to

keep a watch on the stable and the yard? If they really believed Terril to be here they would be carrying themselves warily.

The gate opened cautiously, with never the creak of a hinge. Rapidan stood at one side, his form and the tall gate post resolved into one by the dim, uncertain light. He urged the Blue Smokes horse through, sending it along with a quiet slap on the rump. The end of the long-tie rope Rapidan kept in his hand for the present. The horse, coming to the end of its tether, stopped and stood with uplifted head, taking stock of its new surroundings. A sigh of satisfaction escaped the man. Here, at least, was a certain part of his task done. If Sheriff Law was keen-set on his job, he'd know before long that there was a horse in the yard. And he'd know the horse when he looked at it. One could be sure that he had questioned the Blue Smokes rancher, Bates, on that point.

"I'm helping to sew you up good and tight, Smith-Gerlack," thought Rapidan complacently. And then, on top of that, his thoughts had to fly away to Alarcon —and Alarcon's high spirited daughter. He shook his head; he couldn't help that part of it. Even at the risk of putting the pompous Don Luis in a bad box, he was out to do what he could for Jim Terril. Terril was the under-dog, and victim of an ugly piece of business. Let the chips fall where they would.

He thought of firing a shot, of calling out, of making any fine sort of racket that would bring men tumbling out of doors, or from any lurking place. They would find the horse; he'd be back on Diamond and out of their way before they could catch a glimpse of him. There'd be questions then buzzing about Alarcon's ears like hornets. And there would be such a

search made as would have Bill Smith out of his hole.

Still he hesitated. This line of action would send Rapidan scurrying; he'd not be on hand to make sure that Alarcon did not lie his way out of it. That man was clever; his sentinel eyes were not to be forgotten. No, Rapidan preferred some other way. He wanted to watch, and not to be watched. Law would ask but the flimsiest excuse to gather him in and introduce him to the Nacional jail. He didn't care to be asked by Law to explain what he did here to-night.

He dropped the tie-rope and the horse, discovering that it was free, wandered away across the stable yard. Rapidan stepped in through the gate which he closed after him, and stood looking at the house. The sound of voices came to him again; a man laughed. He didn't like the sound of it, since it had in it less of clean mirth than of jeer and mockery, and so put it down as Molinar's, not liking Molinar. And all the while that he watched, shifting his eyes frequently to the stable, straining his ears for all sounds, he hoped that at any minute Bill Smith would make a break for it. Sooner or later the man would take his chance, slipping out of the house, dodging through the shrubbery, making his run for the stable. Let him try, and Rapidan meant to down him in his tracks. He loosened the revolver in his belt; Bill Smith was going to be a hard man to take. Like Jim Terril, he'd be quiveringly ready to "shoot it out" with any who blocked his way.

Rapidan was fated to wait so long that his muscles cramped and ached from standing still. He began to yawn. No sleep at all last night; not too much the night before. The silence, the lack of incident, pressed his eyelids down. He moved a little where he stood,

getting the cramp out of muscles and the drowsiness out of brain.

And then at last he was conscious of a new element in the night's stillness, a furtive, stealthy movement in the garden. Some one had left the house through one of the dark doors or windows, and passed swiftly and silently into a clump of orange trees, becoming lost in their protective arms, blotted out. Only a fleeting glimpse was caught by Rapidan; he could not begin to be sure if it were the man Hefty Gerlack whom he had known so slightly as Bill Smith. It might have been Smith, who was squattily thick-set; it could have been the trimmer figure of Alarcon himself; and it might be Jesse Law. Just a moving figure that might have been any one's, seen one instant, lost the next, conveying only the impression of secrecy.

Rapidan had been able to look over the adobe wall because of his own height and the further fact of the ground behind the house sloping upward to the fence where he stood. Now he crouched and ran close in, gaining the wall itself where one of the pepper trees dropped its branches over it, making a thick screen of greenery. He peered through the branches, keeping himself hidden.

It remained intensely still there in the old fashioned garden. Mellow paths of light streamed out from the windows, across little bits of velvety lawn and beds of blooming flowers; long black streamers of shadow trailed away from the larger shrubs. The lanes of light served but to accentuate the black of the shadows. A dozen men might have lurked there in the garden. Rapidan began to wonder if more than one did hide there—if one spied upon another—if that was why,

as the minutes dragged by, there was only silence and stillness among the orange shadows.

The floors at Spanish Hacienda were covered with the deepest of soft carpets. Upon them even the casual footfall was silent. Rapidan to-day, in the room of the ancestors, had not heard Don Luis approaching from the hall until he was close to him in the room. In this same silent way, after Rapidan had ridden away that afternoon, Vega Alarcon had chanced, unheard, upon her father and the old majordomo, Esteban, seeming very seriously, almost tragically, engaged in comedy.

It had been an hour or so before Law and little Tipton arrived. Vega had had a moment alone with Molinar, not a pleasant moment for either. He was on his way to a bath and change of clothing, and was surly and abrupt. She, moved deeply by all that had happened after Molinar's fall, looked at him with troubled eyes. A Molinar, yes; he remained that. Yet Rapidan's burning words kept echoing in her brain: ". . . a brute with a horse; a vicious, contemptible brute." A Molinar, the man whom her father wished her to marry and whom, perhaps, she was going to marry; there were demands made upon "the blood." Blood-royal contracted alliances for the sake of the crown; noble families, for the sake of the family. Yet—She heard Rapidan saying again: "A dirty blackguard, in the mud where he belongs."

She had been glad when Molinar departed to his rooms. She lingered a little while in the freshness of the garden. She was angry with Rapidan, as angry as one might be with one who was less than the dust underfoot. And, a rare thing with Vega Alarcon, she was ashamed. Ashamed of Vega Alarcon. For when

Molinar had beaten the satin-black horse—and when Rapidan had punished him for it—she had been glad! If but for one fleeting instant, she had been glad! Glad to see Molinar "in the mud where a blackguard belonged!"

She shivered, there in the hot sunshine. What had come over her?

"There are two girls inside me," she surmised astutely. "I must watch the one who is a shameless thing that would forget her station in life—and run away with a common man!"

She blushed hot at her own admission. More ashamed than ever she hurried into the house—and so came upon Don Luis and old Esteban.

She stopped astounded at what she saw and heard. Don Luis, looking very much in grave earnest, was teaching a very puzzled old Esteban to take snuff!

"You will take it thus, a pinch on the back of your hand. Then you will sneeze."

"But this is no true snuff," complained the mystified old man. "It is but tobacco ground up fine, with pepper in it!"

"You will say, if any should ask, that that is your own invention. We have no snuff, Esteban. And you will confess that this is your secret; that all your life you have taken snuff on the sly. It is necessary—"

Vega began to laugh and Don Luis started and wheeled about, looking at her strangely.

"Poor dear old Esteban," cried Vega, going to the old man and putting an arm about his stooped shoulders. They were very fond of each other, these two; since her toddling babyhood a deep and sincere affection had made them almost like little granddaughter and proud old grandfather.

"It is all right, señorita," said Esteban and managed a bewildered smile back at her. "It will be easy when I get used to it." To show her he pecked at the highly seasoned tobacco-dust, and sneezed violently.

"You will remember, Esteban?" urged Don Luis with never a smile. "If Señor Rapidan should call again; if any other stranger—"

"Pero, papa mio!" cried the girl, mirth displaced by an unquiet concern, "what is this silly thing for? You are not serious?"

To admit that he was, it struck her, was almost to admit that he was mad! But he inclined his head gravely and with quiet emphasis.

"You will not question me, Chiquitita," he said solemnly. "Some day I may explain. Now, I will say only this: The very honor of the Alarcons is touched here."

The honor of the Alarcons! That was something which her father did not speak of lightly. One did not jest in the same breath with an announcement like that. He was in dead earnest, then.—And it had something to do with the tall stranger. No, this was no scene from a farce. She saw that and, seeing nothing beyond it, grew strangely uneasy.

"We shall say nothing of this to any one," said Don Luis. "Only we three know. That is as it should be." And he repeated with greater emphasis than before: "Nothing less is at stake than the Alarcon honor."

Shortly after this piece of mystification Jesse Law and his deputy had ridden into the yard. Vega had seen them first and told her father, thinking that he would be glad as he had ever spoken highly of the sheriff and was ever fond of extending the Alarcon hospitality. But she saw instead a quick contraction of

the fine black brows, and even caught his half-smothered exclamation of vexation. But in another moment Don Luis was all smiles as he rushed out, both hands extended, in what looked like a warm and sincere welcome.

She saw from the beginning that something was very much amiss. She had the explanation—an explanation, rather—at her father's first opportunity for a word alone with her.

Law and Tipton were to stay overnight. It had been impossible for Alarcon not to invite them; never had he turned a man from his door in his life. It simply could not be done. More than that, to have evinced the slightest desire for them to go would have been to awaken suspicion, no matter how soundly it might slumber now. They had said that they were looking for Terril, knowing him to be somewhere near. Vega had heard that and had thought that little Tipton's eyes were more watchful than usual, which was to say very watchful indeed. Presently they had gone to their rooms to prepare for dinner. Don Luis, who had been idling and smiling over his white-paper *cigarita,* leaped to his feet and caught her arm in a grip which the intensity of his emotion made like the clutch of fingers turned into steel.

"Listen!" he whispered. "I tell you our very honor is at stake to-night!—They will watch me; they may not be so suspicious of what you do.—When it is good and dark you must find an excuse; slip outside without any one seeing.—Run to the stable and saddle a horse; do it yourself, Vega—for the love of God!—"

"Papa! Papa, what is it? You frighten me!"

"No, no, no!—Listen to what I say.—Then you will go to my room, making sure that none sees or hears.

And to the door behind the picture—you will tap gently, you will whisper to the one hidden there that the horse is ready—that Law and Tipton are here—"

"There is some one?" Vega whispered wonderingly. And then of a sudden her eyes lighted up. "It is Jimmy Terril? He is here?"

His eyes were everywhere at once, watching doors and windows. He was a long time answering her. Finally he said hurriedly:

"Yes. Terril. In the room behind the picture.—You must not see him, though. You must be able to swear you have not seen him. Do you understand? Do you understand? You will do just as I tell you?"

She winced from the grip of the tensing fingers. But she nodded her head vigorously, and Don Luis loosened her arm and relaxed with a little sigh. He saw Molinar coming to them and was quite himself again, affable, easy, politely charming. Presently Law and Tipton, faces scrubbed until they shone, hair plastered wetly, joined them.

Rapidan, watching the garden, had his own moment of surprise when he saw who it was that hid among the oranges. Vega! He watched curiously as she at last emerged and hurried to the stable.

CHAPTER XVI

To the stable boy Vega, standing herself just inside the barn door and so hidden from any one outside, said quickly:

"You will saddle a horse, Enrique, and ride for me. Immediately."

"Si, señorita!" cried Enrique. *"Al momento!"*

"Quick, then! The horse."

Outside in the dark Rapidan made a wry face of distaste. He had come to-night ready for any eventuality, so long as he had to do with men; Don Luis himself, or Molinar or Law or Tipton; with Bill Smith, most of all. But not with Alarcon's daughter. She was far too fine and clean to have to do with this mess. Yet there she was in the stable, going secretly. He drew nearer, slowly and reluctantly.

"You are ready, Enrique? That is good. Now, you will ride to the other end of the *rancho,* where those Bowens are. I told them this morning to go; you must bring me word if they have done so."

"First, señorita, I shall get one of the men to take my place here at the barn, no?"

"No," she rejoined. "I'm in a hurry to know, Enrique. You may leave that to me."

Enrique, mounting in the stable, dipped his spurs and shot out, his beautiful hat describing a wide and graceful arc in his respectful farewell. The hoofs rang out sharply on the hard-packed yard; Vega winced and her hands flew up involuntarily to her mouth—as though she herself had cried out in betrayal and strove

when too late to still the sound. Enrique pulled his horse in sharply at a gate and stooped to the iron latch. At the moment a voice rang out from the house; Law was on the doorstep, demanding challengingly:

"Who's there?"

Don Luis' calm voice from where Don Luis stood not far from the sheriff, said carelessly:

"It is only one of my *vaqueros,* señor."

Law ran down into the garden and out into the yard; Enrique, mystified, was still at the gate. A word or two passed, Enrique rode off and the sheriff returned slowly to the house.

"Thought it might be Jim Terril," he said bluntly. "He's down this way, Alarcon, and may show up any time."

Don Luis laughed softly. After that Rapidan could not be certain whether they went inside or sat on the veranda. At any rate an angle of the wall hid them from him.

It was very quiet out there at the stable. Now and then a horse stamped. There was a sound around the corner of the barn of a horse drinking; that would be the Blue Smokes horse that had wandered to the far side of the stable. Law had not seen it, nor had Vega. But here it came now, sniffing the odorous hay in the mangers.

From the saddle room came sounds, barely reaching Rapidan: A saddle lifted down, a stirrup lightly struck the floor. There followed the faintest jingle of a bridle chain or a spur chain.

"She is saddling a horse—she sent Enrique off on a wild goose chase—next time it will be Bill Smith—"

Here at last came the Blue Smokes horse, dragging its tie rope in its wake, nosing in at the door. Vega

must have finished her task; she was hurrying out again. Rapidan heard a little gasp from her; then the dragging rope was whipped inside. He wondered if she had recognized the animal? If Law had told what he knew, that Terril had ridden a certain horse down this way? In any case she did not come out for a little while; she would be doing what she could to hide the horse, leading it to some far, shadowy stall.

Rapidan waited, assured that he had now but to watch the stable to catch his man. Enrique sent away, another horse saddled by Vega herself: these incidents pointed too definitely to be misleading. Therefore he should have been richly content. But he was not. What kind of man was Don Luis Alarcon to entertain such madness? And to drag his own daughter into it? Rapidan fell to frowning; he wanted Bill Smith and meant to have him, but he did not want Vega Alarcon implicated. No; she was altogether too fine.—Like the other Vega, his virginal, sparkling, radiant star—

He stiffened to a slight noise. A door opening creaked on its heavy iron hinges. Of course, to so large a stable, there would be a rear door. She was opening it, was going out—was leading the horse after her.

Pressed tight against the stable wall, blotted out in the shadow of an angle, he strove to make out all that she did. She left the horse at the back of the stable she closed the door as quietly as she could; she flitted across the far end of the yard to the gate through which Rapidan had entered a little while ago. The gate she opened wide and so left it. There was to be no second pausing for a gate, as there had been when Enrique rode away! Then, noiseless and swift, she slipped into the garden about the house, vanishing.

And now to look for Smith-Gerlack! A grim satisfaction descended upon Rapidan. A man hunt had never appealed to him; he could not but feel his sympathies run out for any poor devil whom others ran down like a rabbit. But here was a different situation, a man like Smith-Gerlack sneaking away while a fine, upstanding youngster like Jim Terril went to the gallows. Whether or not Bill Smith had killed a man did not matter just now to Rapidan. It was the other thing, and for that thing he would take a savage delight in pulling his man down. Just a few minutes to wait now; five minutes, ten—

Again he was startled into rigidity. Yonder, close to the fence at the lower end of the yard, a man's figure moved along swiftly and yet in silence and stealth. He must have slipped out of the house from the other side, crept through the lower end of the garden and gone up over the wall. He crouched slightly as he hurried along; Rapidan could make nothing of his form; it might have been any one of the several men from the house. Smith? He had little doubt that it was Smith, yet he meant to make sure. It might come to shooting to-night, and mistakes could be made in the dark, tragic mistakes.

The hurrying figure followed the fence until opposite the stable door, the front door, and then sped across the yard and shot through, disappearing. Rapidan ran the few necessary paces and looked in at the big door, standing just at the side. There went his man, still hurrying, carrying a lantern now. Rapidan was so sure that it was Bill Smith now that he too entered the stable. If it were Bill Smith no doubt he meant to go out at the rear door, where the horse awaited him. The lantern made its swinging circle of

light on the floor, illuminating a pair of heavy boots, showing little of the man above the boot tops.

Whoever he was, he was passing along the row of stalls, looking at the horses. He stopped at the last stall. Here stood the horse from the Blue Smokes. As he lifted the lantern high to see better, a quiet, "Aha!" burst from him, and only then did Rapidan see that it was the sheriff.

Almost at the same instant the sheriff saw Rapidan, a tall, rangy figure indistinct in the lesser light just beyond the circle of the lantern's greater brightness. But there was light enough to glint on the weapon already in Rapidan's hand.

"Easy, Terril," said Law quietly. "No use starting anything. Tipton's on the job, along with me; there are other men—"

"I'm not Terril! Terril's not here, but—"

Law, looking for Terril, thought that he saw Terril standing before him, only a few yards away. And he knew that he was hunting a man who would rather shoot it out, though he had not one chance in a thousand, than go to a surer and uglier death. His mind, working swiftly, was not impressed by Rapidan's denial. He was watching the hand that held the Colt forty-five and regretting that his own hand had the long, long journey to make to his own hip.

Rapidan took a step forward; he meant, since needs must, to let the sheriff see with whom he had to deal, then to tell him that he could look for his man to come presently to the saddled horse at the back of the barn. But Jesse Law, still thinking fast in the smooth groove into which his thoughts had slipped, had but one thought: To get this man. He saw that just now the advantages were all against him; and he saw, too,

how to equalize them. As quick as a cat he went into action, and his acts were to hurl the lantern from him, smashing and going out against a wall, while he threw himself to one side in the dark, and whipped out his own weapon.

"I'll get you against the starlight of the door," he shouted warningly. "Better be good, kid."

Rapidan grunted his disgust, and began searching for a match. He'd have to light it, let Law see his face in the little yellow flame, and then make what explanations he could. But a sudden eloquent sound of a man running, just outside along the stable wall, broke on his ears and filled him with dismay. There, at length, went Bill Smith!

"You fool," he shouted at Law, "your man's out there!" and with never another thought of what Law might do, he whirled and dashed out through the big doors. Law saw the blur of his running figure and fired as for an instant it was outlined against the field of low-hung stars. Rapidan's hat was carried off his head and, he verily believed, a lock of hair with it. But he was around the corner now.

And so, in the dark, he crashed headlong into another man and they both went down. In another instant Jesse Law was on them, Rapidan's collar gripped in his right hand, a cold steel barrel forced against Rapidan's middle.

"Oh, you fool, you fool!" yelled Rapidan.

"Tip! Oh, Tipton. I've got him."

The yard seemed filled with men. Here ran Tipton. There stood Don Luis, asking questions as though this were all a dark mystery to him, as in fact a good bit of it was! And there, close to Don Luis, was another man, short, even squatty—

"I'm not Terril, I tell you. Terril isn't here. But there's the man you want. It's Bill Smith!"

"He's crazy!" gasped Don Luis.

The man at Don Luis' side began moving away, stepping backward, toward the corner of the stable. Only a few feet away was the saddled horse—and the open gate.

"He means the King of Siam," grunted Law. "Or maybe the Dook of Yawk!"

"That man, backing off there—Watch him!" cried Rapidan.

Both Law and Tipton, thinking that they had Jim Terril at last, were on Rapidan now, gripping his arms, forcing his weapon down. Little Tipton was the first of them to feel that something was going off wrong; he thrust his face close to Rapidan's and grunted to Law:

"Hell, man! This ain't Terril—"

By now the short, squatty man, withdrawing more and more swiftly, was a dozen paces off.

"Not Terril?" muttered the sheriff and struck a match. "Rapidan, you!" He began voicing his disgust, only to break short, snapping out: "His horse is in the barn, Tip. He's close by."

"I tell you," yelled Rapidan, wrenching violently yet for the moment held by sheriff and deputy on each side, "that man—the other side of Don Luis—Don't let him get away!"

"That's not Terril," retorted Law angrily, though he, too, began to watch the short man. "Terril's twice as tall and half as thick."

If there was a modicum of the craft in Bill Smith with which he was credited, he needed it now. All eyes ran out toward him. But he rose to the occasion, rather

splendidly. Now he broke his silence, making his voice as gruff and low as he could, crying out loudly:

"*Aja! Se fué! Mira!*—Jeem Terril, she's runnin'—"

In the hubbub his cry passed for that of a Mexican hired hand. He threw out his arm, pointing into the further dark; and pointing leaped forward. He shouted as he ran, "Thees-away! *Pronto!*" and vanished about the corner of the stable.

"Where?" demanded Law and Tipton together, running after him.

Rapidan tore along after them; they had left him his weapon after all and all he asked was a good glimpse of the running man. Smith shouted again, calling, "There—Queek!" but had disappeared somewhere back of the stable. Of course he was going for the saddled horse; Vega had told him.

And there at last, unhidden before them all, Bill Smith in the saddle dashed toward the open gate, still shouting and pointing and leading the way! The man had nerve and resource. Rapidan threw up his arm, certain to bring him down. But Law was close by and saw and struck his hand down. And Bill Smith, calling to them to follow, that he was on Terril's heels, shot through the gate and vanished across the field to the north.

There was a wild rush to the stable for horses. Men saddled in a fine fury of haste and sped away in the general direction the short man had taken, Law and Tipton, and with them, still playing his part, Don Luis Alarcon; and with him, as an interested guest, Fernando Molinar.

Rapidan, groping for the revolver which had been knocked from his hand, found that he was alone in the yard—with Vega Alarcon.

CHAPTER XVII

"You!" she gasped incredulously. She had heard the sheriff's disgusted exclamation; she had little difficulty now in recognizing Rapidan. "Oh—Traitor!"

"I hope you're happy now," he said angrily. "You're pretty sure, after this, to hang the boy."

"It is you—you—*you!*" Loathing and contempt choked her; that mere *"you!"* was anathema enough.

"You!" he flung back at her in her own coinage. "Letting Bill Smith go free, to hang Terril."

"Bill Smith!—You are mad! He was killed—long ago—"

He had started toward the gate and Black Diamond beyond. The very intensity of her speech, the quality of her voice, checked him an instant.

"When you went to the stable and saddled a horse—Whom was it for?" he demanded sharply.

"For Jimmy Terril, of course. You know—And you, having saved him in the desert, meant to betray him—For the dirty reward!" she concluded bitterly.

"You thought that?"

"I knew!"

"But, I tell you, it's not true! Terril hasn't been within ten miles of Spanish Hacienda!"

"Didn't I see his horse in the stable?"

"I put it there!"

"You!"

"And Terril isn't here, hasn't been here!—What made you think he was? You didn't see him!"

"My father—" She broke off, confused.

"If your father told you that—" He, too, broke off.

She stiffened; he could note how her head was flung up.

"An Alarcon does not lie, señor!"

"Good Lord!—Look here; did you think that short man was Terril?"

"No. Of course not. He kept saying—"

"Who, then, was that man?"

She hesitated.

"I—I do not know, señor."

"But I do! So does Don Luis! And—Tell me this," and he advanced close to her, wishing he could see her face. *"Does your old majordomo use snuff?"*

She answered, but in a queer voice, "Are you crazy, then? To ask a mad question like that?" But more than ever she was confused, remembering the scene on which she had chanced that afternoon; her father acting so strangely, old Esteban learning his lesson. And—the—honor—of the Alarcons!

"Answer me!"

Another, whom they had not noted, had been drawn out into the yard by all the uproar. Now, not a dozen feet away, came an answer to Rapidan's question. Old Esteban, with all his wits about him, sneezed violently. Once, twice and again.

Rapidan groaned. He made out who it was shambling along toward them and of a sudden the heart went out of him. What if, after all, he had been as "fantastic" as Don Luis had accused him of being? Building up everything on a sneeze—What if he had seen no Bill Smith at all to-night? The short man, crying out like any low class Mexican, could then have been exactly what he appeared to be, a hired hand—

Yet, it remained that Jim Terril lay hidden not a great many miles away, and that the sheriff and the others had ridden to the north, in the general direction of Terril. And that this girl, if he could believe anything on earth now, was a friend to Terril.

"Señorita," said Rapidan sternly, "I must hurry after them. But first—Will you swear to me—on the honor of an Alarcon!—that you thought to aid Jim Terril's escape to-night?"

Why did he speak like that? Why did all his words shake her confidence in her own knowledge? Why did he succeed in making her doubt her own father, her own acts?

"I swear it, señor," she said in a low, troubled voice.

"There was a man hidden in the house? And you thought it was Jim Terril? You saddled for him, carried him the word—in a dark room, perhaps?—"

"Yes, señor," she replied, wondering more than ever, growing a little faint with doubts which were tremulous with a vague horror, of what she knew not.

"If I give you my solemn word that Terril has not been here to-night, that he has not come within several miles of this place, will you believe that, señorita?"

"How shall I believe—"

She was Terril's friend; he was going to bank everything on that. And if ever a man needed friends, that man now was Jim Terril.

He had guarded his voice that old Esteban, sneezing away where he had halted, might hear nothing he said. Now he suggested hurriedly:

"Will you please ask your majordomo to draw off a little way? This is for your ears, Miss Alarcon."

"Esteban," she called to the old servant. "We would speak in privacy, please."

He nodded and murmured something and went back to the house.

"I have Terril hidden where, for the present, I don't think they'll find him. They have their hands full right now with—with quite another matter. But, I too, will have to follow on after them. So, if you will go with me now to Terril, you will come by two things: The first is that I am not lying to you; and the second, and important one, is that with no other friend at hand, you may be able to help the kid. On top of other things, he's got himself a slight wound."

"Oh!" Then she fell silent; he could sense the look in her eyes, concentrating upon him, seeming to burn through the dark.

"If you are not afraid to ride with me?" he asked curtly.

"Where, señor?"

"To my ranch. He is hidden there."

"You—in your turn, señor, you swear to me that this is the truth?"

"Yes," he said simply.

How he disturbed all her preconceptions! How he set her doubting, wondering—fearing. But of him, somehow, she was not afraid.

"Come." She brushed by him, running to the stable. "We must saddle the horses."

They had spoken swiftly, words tumbling over one another and though Rapidan fretted with the delay, they had consumed thus something less than two minutes! Rapidan ran ahead of her into the stable; she found a lantern and he lighted it, saddled the first horse and in another couple of minutes they were ready. He ran ahead, out into the field where he had

left Black Diamond. He called as he ran and Diamond nickered.

"You will follow me for a little?" he called to her as he went up into the saddle. "I want to race on and see if I can hear or catch a glimpse of the others.—Diamond, old boy, *dig into it!*"

She had not thought that any horse could distance her as Diamond did now. She put her own mount to his best, but further and further Diamond drew away, growing small and hard to see across the rolling fields until at last only the roll of hoofbeats told where he ran, and in time even they fell away and she rode quite alone.

After that it was a full twenty minutes before she came up with him. Rapidan had slackened speed for her.

"I got a view of them going over a ridge," he said as the two horses galloped side by side. "Law has made them spread out like a fan; I guess he'll be on one outer edge and Tipton on the other. It will be hard for any man to break back without being seen—They are driving their man straight ahead—"

"What man, señor?" she asked quickly. She had heard all that he had said to Law back there in the stable yard; she, too, had wondered if he were mad then.

"Time will tell," he retorted. And for a while they rode in silence.

"We'd better get down here," he told her when they came to the outer fringe of the cottonwoods at his ranch. "We'll go ahead on foot, and quietly. I've got a visitor at the house. Barfoot."

"Barfoot!—That man can't be trusted!"

"Nor do I trust him. He knows nothing about Terril. This way, señorita."

He led the way among the trees and she followed close behind. And at every step she asked herself answerless questions. Questions having to do with this man and with Terril; with all that had happened back yonder at Spanish Hacienda, and all that might be happening somewhere out toward the Blue Smokes; with old Esteban, taking snuff! "An Alarcon does not lie!" Yet how her father's actions bewildered her; how uneasy she grew, grappling with elusive, mocking, shadowy suspicions!

Several times, in the darkest places, Rapidan stopped, wishing to make sure that no one followed them; he moved circuitously, more and more cautious at every step. They entered the narrow, wooded cañon back of the house. There was an old, ramshackle bridge here; Rapidan went down under it, bidding her wait. And almost immediately he was back at her side—and she saw a man standing behind him and knew that here was Jim Terril.

"It is Señorita Alarcon, Jim," said Rapidan in a low voice. "She is a friend, kid. You'll talk things over with her, and make a plan or two. I've got to leave you for a while; all night, any way, and maybe several days.—You'll tell her everything that has happened? When you got here, and where you've been to-night?"

"Wait!" she urged, coming closer. "Mr. Terril, I am your friend, you know that?"

"Yes," he answered, boyishly impetuous. "You and your father, both. You stood by me in great shape during my trial—"

"Tell me: Where have you been to-night?"

"Why, right here," said Terril.

"Have you been at Spanish Hacienda at all? To-day or to-night?"

"No. I got to Rapidan's place here about noon, I guess it was. I've been right here ever since."

New words, clanging uglily like brazen bells, rang in her brain: "An Alarcon does lie, being hard driven!" Hard driven, yes. But by what?

They were waiting for her to say something. She could find no words to break through the din of those brazen ringings. Rapidan broke the silence, saying thoughtfully:

"I'll leave you two now. First, I'm going and wake Barfoot up."

"Barfoot?" burst from Terril.

"In the house. Asleep. She'll tell you. I'm going in to him now and tell him that Law and the rest are off like mad to run you down somewhere this side the Blue Smokes. That will drag him off the scent—if he happens to be on it. And then I'll dust along."

"Wait!" said Vega again. And then, "Will you come back here? Before you start after the others?"

"You want me to? All right."

In such haste did he go upon his errand that he was back with them, starting noiselessly out from the shadows, amost immediately.

"I told Barfoot; he's on his way back to sleep, I think. But he's a tricky boy, Jim, so keep your eye stretched when he's around. He may be gone in the morning; he may stick around. Here, anyway, is something to eat that I brought from the kitchen; Barfoot thought it was for me. It'll keep you going a day or two, if it has to.—And now, Miss Alarcon?"

"I have talked with Mr. Terril; he will be all right here for a day or two. And now, I too am going."

"Where? Back to the Hacienda?"

"With you, señor. After the others."

"But, señorita—"

"There are no buts, señor," she told him with a flash of spirit. "You follow the others, I also."

"It is folly—madness."

"Madness, yes, if you like, señor. There is much madness, I think, in the air to-night."

"But your father—"

He was going to say, "Your father, what will he say of this?" But she broke in impulsively:

"Yes, my father! It is because of him! There is something—Oh, señor! He is in danger! What it is that threatens, I do not know; I cannot guess. Something terrible! I am afraid—"

"You could do nothing. No. I'll go alone." He turned to stride away.

"As you will, señor," she said coldly. "I ride with no man unless he is very glad to have me. But—I ride, then, alone!"

When Rapidan returned to the horses she was but little behind him. He aided her to mount.

"Gracias, señor," she said simply.

Side by side and with never another word they rode off through the night, their horses' heads turned toward the still distant Blue Smokes.

CHAPTER XVIII

"WHAT is Time?" Rapidan wondering, asking himself; Rapidan riding through the night. Above him the golden galaxy; his star, Vega, shining brilliantly; at his side, Vega, the girl. Time? Here again, in Barfootian parlance, was a consideration baffling human understanding, and hence ticketed with a name "and let it go at that." The wonder is, if Barfoot be right in contending that resounding nomenclatures come into being through necessity to mask large ignorance, that a more ambitious name was not evolved in this instance —say, temporaltransitivity, no less!

. . . For certainly Rapidan had ridden down to Nacional Sunday night—and here it was now Monday night! Measured by the futile hands of a silly fool of a clock, it was a period of a scant handful of hours; gauged, however, by the content of those hours, episode and incident, emotion, hopes and fears and urgent striving, why, then, as long as many a drab lifetime. Time was the imaginary husk into which was packed the reality, Life. Or the invisible thread on which were strung acts and thoughts, like beads; black beads and golden, red and azure. Or the mere distance between occurrences, physical, mental and spiritual; in itself nothing. Or, best of all, there was no such thing as time; therefore give it a learned name; cover it with scientific terminology. Surely temporaltransitivity! Fine. Always drape the rarest of tapestries over "the portals of magnificent darkness."

Vega, the girl, was looking at him curiously—as

well she might! How strangely silent he was; one's preoccupation at times may be so deep that his neighbor feels it. They rode swiftly, their horses being already warmed to the pace, and they having a long ride ahead of them, but Rapidan, for one, was unconscious of speed. Perhaps he was jaded from lack of sleep, his mind become flighty; a thousand considerations flitted through his brain, coming and going at will. Terril's dilemma, a man who sneezed, a hold-up near Nacional, a man who limped; Molinar and Don Luis and Hefty Gerlack; Barfoot and Barfoot's insinuations, and the long chain of memories which sprang up, unleashed and whipped into the race; Vega—

Vega, the star, seemed to sweep along with them, glorious bejewelled point in lustrous Lyra, Rapidan's lode-star. Some day the rest of the world would set their courses by it, as he set his own now.

"Do you know the stars?" he asked, and startled her with his question, so far afield was her own mind.

"Only as I know the wild flowers; not by their names."

"Yonder is old Altair!" He flung out his arm to point. " 'The Flying Eagle,' they name him. A fine old traveller, too; I've watched him many's the night. But my star? See how those three make a triangle, almost right-angled? Arcturus and Polaris at respectful distances from my star, pointing her out; she is at the main angle. They gave her a pretty Arabic name; it means 'The Falling Bird.'—That's Vega," he concluded rather simply.

"Rather like my name," she said quietly, rather than allow her silence to seem to invest his remark with any secondary significance.

"The spelling is the same. The Spanish pronunciation is, of course, prettier. Just as the Spanish always is."

"You are interested in astronomy?" she asked, noting how after his studied silence he purposefully turned his thoughts away from the maelstrom which for a while had held them; feeling that he was drawing her own meditations clear of the whirlpool for the moment, and not being ungrateful for it. For they were doing all they could, ride; and only at the ride's end could more be done—if even then.

"No," he said, "it's too heady for me; strangles me with its mathematics. Now Astrology," he ran on, not more than nine-tenths in jest, "is an Art, while Astronomy is but a Science! Science limps along by jerks, zigzag style in little broken lines, losing true trails and nosing them out again; and Art soars like a bird."

Her eyes were upon the star he had pointed out to her.

"But your bird, too, may be a 'Falling Bird!' "

"Oh, don't be afraid of my star losing her bright place," he laughed, in his rare, soft chuckling way; "she'll not really fall, you know; she's but stepping down a bit to take her true station in the heavens where she'll reign like a bright and glorious queen—and time will come when the mariner on the dark seas will set his course by her."

. . . He thought of the girl, Vega, "stepping down." She some day to wed with Fernando Molinar? Barfoot, who knew a very great deal of what was going on, more than broadly hinted of it. She, so like a star; Molinar, of the mud and muddy ways. . . .

They swept along, through the little hills bounding Rapidan's ranch, and out upon the edge of a great

plain. Here the fringes of the desert impinged upon the areas of fertility and cultivation. The vales of plenty lay behind, wide barren wastes ahead. Desert stars hang low so that it is easy to fancy that you are riding through them, among them. They are not like the stars that twinkle over cities, but seem larger and brighter and more intimate. The night was sweet and cool and intensely still; the desert before them, extending on and on until it swept up into the bases of the Blue Smokes Mountains, was at the moment a thing of sheer beauty. By day, under the hot sun that smote down "like some mad demon beating upon a blazing copper kettle," it might be garish, sweltering, all snarl and fang and rank venom; by night it was a region of tender mystery, of soft gray expanses of sand lending a kindly reflection to the star-glow and making the world more mildly luminous. Harsh dry gulches were no longer all arid ugliness; the growths of smoke-trees in them were like fairy forests spun of mist and silver, and a lonely giant saguaro was become through stellar necromancy a watch-tower for little elf-owls.

The falling hoof-beats gave out little sound, and the sound itself from its rhythmic monotony, became negligible. The two riders seemed to float outward, skimming the earth, advancing to the stars. The immensity of flat empty plain, and vast velvet sky strewn with stars and star-dust, forces two into a oneness of community. As individuals may unite in the stress of a common danger, so here did they unite under the urge of a common, compelling glory. The glory of night upon the desert. The time and the place of strange magical distillations. For a space one may forget what lies behind and ignore what awaits in front. The hour,

standing apart from all other hours, is sufficient unto itself.

"Are you tired?" Rapidan asked once.

"No," she answered quietly, and a little sigh floated out after the single word.

They encountered heavy, loose sand and drew their horses down to a swinging walk; they drifted on, deeper and deeper, into a region which grew ever more truly desert. All vegetation was sparse and dry and gray and looked like insubstantial shapes of palely silvered smoke. From wide areas where nothing grew they entered thickets of mesquite that drove its smooth, iron roots amazing distances in their sure search for hidden water.

"Look!" said Rapidan once, pointing far ahead.

They were on the crest of a long swelling hummock of sand. The gray, open wastes, unclothed, ran limitlessly before them; what with the bare sand below and the bright stars above there was considerable ghostly light. She saw what he indicated—or thought that she saw. Something small and dark, outlined an instant against the dropped curtain of the sky, swiftly gone.

"A coyote?"

"Or a man on horseback? Very far off."

"My father! Or the sheriff or one of the other men!"

"Or the man who fled on before them!"

Involuntarily she reined in close beside him. If she could only see his face!

"Who was that man?" she asked, and he could just make out her eyes in the shadow of her hair.

"You know, now, that it wasn't Jim Terril!"

"Yes. Yes, I knew it even then. He was far too short and stout to be taken for Jimmy Terril. And you will

remember that he, too, was after some one whom he saw fleeing—and that he called out that the man he thought was Terril was escaping—and that his voice was that of a Mexican laborer!"

"Yes," admitted Rapidan, curt and rather grim about it.

When she saw that he would go no further, she added, to prompt him:

"You—before he spoke—said that he was—Bill Smith! But that was absurd, you know!"

"Absurd?—Yes," he admitted. But his admission only piqued rising interest; she felt that he amended to himself the statement; he might be saying under his breath: "Absurdities may be realities."

"For," she ran on argumentatively, her voice quickened, "to begin with, he is dead. And the man's voice was that of a Mexican, not at all like Bill Smith's; even the words were Spanish with a Mexican intonation."

"Yes," he said again.

"You mean," she caught him up, "that it was the man Smith, and that he has some reason to keep hidden and that he was acting a part, pretending to be a Mexican?"

She felt that he was smiling queerly when he retorted:

"Can one little 'Yes' mean all that?" And after a short silence: "Do you think the short man was one of your father's hands? If so, which one?"

She did not know. All along she had wondered, puzzled and on the edge of nameless uneasiness. The man had sprung up all of a sudden; Don Luis appeared to accept him; yet Don Luis' daughter had not the vaguest idea who he was. Certainly none of the *vaqueros* whom she knew.

"But," she cried with a rush of excitement, "if by any weird chance it were Bill Smith—Why, then papa did not know! And it would mean that Jimmy Terril would be saved!"

"If we ever come up with this same Bill Smith," he reminded her.

Beyond that he would not go. It was not his province to awaken those terrible suspicions within her against her own father which would surely start up did he tell all that he himself knew and suspected. He could but watch, seeking far ahead, mostly to right and to left, while asking himself what was the likely outcome to expect from to-night's adventure. The short man, who he was so confident was Bill Smith, had snatched boldly at his one chance, and had secured a good lead over the others at Spanish Hacienda, spurring off in his pretended pursuit of Jim Terril. But the others had not been far behind him, and there were the broad, open fields to be crossed. Little chance of him losing hawk-eyed men like Law and Tipton under such conditions. They would have had him in sight; they would have pounded along after him, Don Luis and Molinar at their heels.

And then—what? Inevitably Smith's best bet would have been to spar for time. He'd point on ahead, vowing that the fugitive had ridden that way. Law would spread his men out, fanwise. Smith would wait for the opportunity to drop back, to turn south while they sped on north.

But would that opportunity ever offer itself? Law and Tipton were hard men to make fools of. Long before now they would be asking themselves a host of questions. They would be wanting to know who this man was that led them along. The question would ulti-

mately start up: "Is he a confederate of Jim Terril's? Is Terril back at Spanish Hacienda while this man leads us away from him?"

No, from the jump Law and Tipton would not be the men to lose sight of the short, squat man. If he succeeded in doubling back on them, he would have to add tall luck to his native cunning. And there at their rear came Rapidan, watching far out, to right and to left.

"They haven't come up with him yet," Rapidan decided. "They'd have a look at his face, and the jig would be up; ended in a free for all shooting scrape. And Smith will drive on to the Blue Smokes; it's about his only hope now. Law suspects Don Luis; he'll suspect Molinar; he'll suspect anybody and everybody and keep his eye on all hands.—And in time, if not already, he'll be asking himself why I said, 'It's Smith.'"

It was a long ride and Rapidan was determined to take it coolly. Since he could not hope to be in the lead, it was better to be far enough behind to serve as a rear guard, to take unawares any man who might have broken back. And it was well to save his own horse. There was to-morrow to look to. If Smith rode recklessly now, his mount would be worn out by the journey's end. If he got to the Blue Smokes safe, he'd have to lie hidden until his horse rested or until he could find another.

And he knew that none of the others would be going on at a run all the while; no horse could stand it across the frequent patches of loose sand. He recalled the old story of the coyote chasing the jackrabbit in the desert, when it was so hot that they went along at a walk. Yet when, now and again, the shifting sand gave place

to harder earth, as along low-lying ridges, wind-broomed where rocky strata were uncovered, he sent Diamond along at a gallop, knowing the others had galloped here. He did not hurry unduly, nor yet did he loiter; and never did his wide vigilance relax.

They had ridden perhaps half the distance to the broken bases of the mountains when they came to a thriving thicket of arrow-weed. Here Rapidan drew rein, suggesting:

"A water hole, no doubt. Arrow-weed is particular where he drives his roots. Tired yet?"

Again she answered "No." But when the horses, given a free rein, trotted to the shallow basin where the thick turbid water flashed back the stars, she acted on his suggestion to dismount and so rest a moment while the horses drank. He was first on his feet, thrusting ahead of the horses, stooping close to the ragged rim of the pool to see if other horses had watered here to-night. There were fresh tracks, the water still trickling into them.

"We're not so far behind," he said as they mounted and rode on. "I expect we'll catch another glimpse of them pretty soon."

"I'll be glad," she exclaimed, "to come up with my father! To tell him what you suspect—"

"He knows already," he returned bluntly. "I told him this morning."

"This morning?" she gasped. "You mean that this morning, even, you thought that that man Smith was at our place? You did not see him?"

"No."

"Then, why?"

He hesitated. Well, after all, she'd have to learn a

lot soon. If it came upon her gradually, certainly the shock would be no greater.

"I saw a hat in the *patio*. It was Bill Smith's hat.—And I heard a man sneeze!—Of course—I did not know then of the habit old Esteban has—"

She gripped the horn of her saddle as, of a sudden, she grew very tense, rigid with a surge of emotion which came near dizzying her. The scene upon which she had come at home this very day, her father and the old *mayordomo!* Esteban to take snuff; to swear that he had always taken snuff in secret. *"For the honor of the Alarcons!"*

It was some moments before she could speak.

"Do you mean, señor," she flashed out at him passionately, "that my father would do a thing such as you hint at? That knowingly he would harbor such a man, while another, a fine young fellow like Jimmy Terril, was to die for that other man's murder?—But this is madness, señor; and insolence—and a lie!"

He said nothing. But he thought sadly: "Poor little Vega; poor little falling bird.—She is riding full tilt into black sorrow. And I am massing it up for her! Pray God that Don Luis has nothing worse to answer for than harboring Bill Smith." And he was thinking bleakly of the horse with the white forefeet, and the affair at Nacional.

She had thrown the lie in his teeth—and he swallowed it in all meekness. She reined her horse far away from his side and they rode in silence and aloofness. But after a long while, and so imperceptibly that he doubted if she noticed, the horses again galloped side by side. Was it the bigness of the naked, empty world about them that bore her down and drove her to touch some outer fringe of companionship? Or was it

the greater desert which may spread so widely, wearily in the human breast?—For she knew that, though he might be all mistaken as she so wildly prayed, yet he did not lie.

True to his prediction they were soon to catch glimpses of the others. Once very far ahead, going over a ridge, a solitary horseman, diminished by distance, pressing on toward the Blue Smokes. And again, further to the side, and also far off, still another rider, also making for the mountains.

"No chance for a man to turn back," Rapidan repeated to himself. "Not with Jesse Law and little Tipton on the job. He'll get into the mountains all right. And there the real job begins.—Take it easy, Diamond, old boy."

And at last they came to the flinty slopes which rose up sharply to the misty blue of crest and spire and star-crowned turret, the Blue Smokes Mountains, rugged and severe and majestically impressive as they stood with their head in the skies and their feet in the flat desert. And of a sudden, like a star slipped from its place, a light shone out upon them.

"It is Casa Primavera," the girl explained quickly. "Here is Springtime Cañon. My father has a cabin here."

"Not the Bates ranch?"

"No. The Bates ranch is further back in the mountains; about two miles. This is my father's place; he comes here sometimes to hunt."

"The light, then, shows that some of our party are at the Casa Primavera. It must be two or three o'clock. No one else would be up."

"It is my father then!" And she urged her horse ahead into the narrowing path.

The light was soon blotted out. A creek, thin thread of flashing water, ran down the cañon, and water-loving trees grew along it. The sides of the cañon, higher up, were coated with piñons. On a little level spot, soon reached, was a long, low log-cabin. Inside a lantern was burning.

The sheriff stepped to the door as they rode up, calling out sharply:

"Hello! who's there?"

"It is I, Señorita Alarcon," answered the girl, adding in anxious haste: "My father? Is he here?"

"Who's with you?"

"It is Mr. Rapidan. But my father?"

Jesse Law came out.

"Better step in, Miss Alarcon," he said, "and take a rest. Don Luis has ridden on; maybe as far as the Bates place. He'll be back this way before long.—I'll take care of your horse. And I want a word with your companion."

She hesitated, then slipped from the saddle and went slowly into the cabin. The sheriff came to Rapidan.

"Just where do you fit in?" he demanded, his voice frankly unfriendly. "What are you here for?"

"I want to see what happens," came the markedly drawling answer. "I happen to be interested. Before we're done with all this I am going to have a nice little chat with the man that led you on this wild goose chase."

"You're a cool hand, brother," snorted the sheriff.

Rapidan eased himself sideways in the saddle and began making a cigarette. Law watched him a moment, then occupied himself similarly. The two

matches flared, the two men drew the first long pulls at their glowing cigarettes.

"Rapidan," spoke the sheriff presently, cold and grim and quiet, "I've got my hands full-up to-night without taking you on. I don't know quite what you're playing for, but here are some things I do know: You got Terril out of my way once; you butted in down in Nacional and spoiled my play again. Some man stepped in and made it possible for Terril to escape in the first place, when on his way to the pen, and I've a notion you might be that man! Some man robbed the Esperanza paymaster down by Nacional, and I've got the notion you might be that man."

"You're almighty free with your suspicions," grunted Rapidan.

"As a rule I don't blow everything I know, either. But to-night I'm after one thing at the time. You're to keep strictly out of my way, *sabe?* Knowing what I know about you, I'd just as lief nip your young career with a dose of lead, as burn tobacco."

"Thanks for the warning. I'll swap even with you, Law. First, you've got me dead wrong. Next, you're dead wrong in thinking you've sniffed Jim Terril's trail. He hasn't been near Spanish Hacienda—"

"How about the Blue Smokes horse?" said Law with a snap.

"Never mind the horse. That's another story," said Rapidan coolly. "I'll tell it to you before long, too. But that short man that said Terril was skipping out and then led you along, lied.—And I'll bet," he added significantly, "that he didn't stop anywhere along the road for a palaver with you!"

"No! But by the Lord," cried Law, "he'll palaver

with me all right before I'm done with him! He's somewhere in the hills here, and no man in the Blue Smokes is going to sneak out without my knowing it!"

"There's the Bates place, you know. There are fresh horses there, I suppose—"

"And little Tip's there, too! No, no, Mr. Rapidan; I'll hold these dinky little mole-hills in the hollow of my hand—like that!" A great sinewy hand was extended, the fingers slowly curving in until at the end they leaped into a clutching fist.

"Hope so," said Rapidan. "By the way, know who the squat man is by now?"

Law was looking at him, making what he could of the shadowed face. At last he exclaimed with one of his short snorts:

"When I do get time to gather you in, I'm blessed if I know whether it will be to slap you in the pen or the bug-house!—Are you crazy enough to think for one little split second that you can get your pal Terril a new trial on a wild, drunk man's say-so that Bill Smith is alive after all this? What kind of booze have you been drinking anyway?"

"Gather in the man who led you out this way," said Rapidan mildly, "and I'll talk to you about that.—Only, when you come up with him, be sure you go for your gun first. Else they'll be needing a new sheriff in these parts, Mr. Law."

CHAPTER XIX

When Sheriff Jesse Law asserted that he held the Blue Smokes Mountains in the hollow of his hand he knew whereof he spoke. Whether Terril were hidden in some cañon here or was nowhere near, he did not know. But he meant that from now on no man was to leave the mountains without the sanction of Sheriff Jesse Law. Certainly not that short squat man who had led the way and then taken it upon himself to vanish.

Law knew very well now what he was about. The Blue Smokes constituted a gigantic flinty-spired, chasm-rifted oasis rising abruptly, falling away abruptly in a great level expanse of sand and cactus; a lofty-cliffed island in a sea of sand. In a land of fantastic geological formations, it was comparable to an eroded mesa magnified a thousand fold. An easy place for a man to hide, so uneven, so gouged into narrow gorges, like an old cheese for the holes into which a fugitive might slip. But a hard place for a man to leave, when Law was on the job.

For one required a trustworthy horse to carry him in safety across the dry, barren miles; and Law took immediate steps to check up on horses. Tipton, spurring up to the Bates place, had all the animals there corralled. There were, on the northern slopes, the two sheepherders and their three pack-animals; Tipton herded them into his corral and left one of the men on guard there. For the little deputy had his orders to serve himself all that might be with Don Luis and

Molinar, and very strict and unnecessary admonition to trust neither. There remained, in these uplands, but two other small ranches; both at the eastern end. And Bates himself, routed out of bed and told that they sought Terril, went eagerly and vengefully about the task of making sure that no horses anywhere ran free for a desperate man to seize.

"We've put our gink on foot, that's one thing," muttered Law. "And he'll have a hot time walking out of this!"

To be sure the squat man, in whom the sheriff began to take an interest hardly second to that longer, simmering one in Jim Terril, had a horse. But he had ridden the nearly forty miles from Spanish Hacienda with little thought of saving his beast; and it was not the animal, unrested, unwatered, that he'd care to trust himself to for another long leg of desert travel. At least not until he had tried for a fresh mount.

And meanwhile the sheriff had completed his precautionary gestures. As he had intimated to Rapidan, it was not his habit to tell everything he knew. To Bates and to the two sheep men he gave the impression that Terril, the man who had so recently made monkeys of them, locking them in Bates' barn, was back here in the mountains. Be sure they were ripe to expend themselves in squaring an account. And, to make sure of his second quarry, he informed them that they might look to find an accomplice of Terril's, a short, heavy set rascal, *whom Jesse Law was particularly impatient to have a word with!*

Nor yet did he rest on his oars. In the log cabin he drafted a round dozen telegrams, sending them out later by Bates. There was not a village within a fifty mile radius, hardly a ranch, that would not have a

lively subject for conversation within a few hours. Then, said Law, let Terril try to sneak through—or let the other jasper try! Just—let—him—try! Sheriff Law broke his pencil on the last telegram.

"It may take days and it may take weeks," he made up his mind. "But in the end I'll nab whatever's in the trap. Times like this it simplifies matters not to have too many water holes scattered around in the desert! Sure does. And with me close herding the horses—Not a chance, my bozo; nary."

From the Casa Primavera, Don Luis Alarcon's hunting lodge, over the hump of the mountains to where their further slopes merged with the sea of sand, was not above half a dozen miles; from east to west the Blue Smokes fell short of extending twice that distance. Many hiding places, as Law admitted, in this broken area of thirty or forty square miles; but few watering places. A man had to have food, sooner or later, too; but water was the thing. Yes, it might take a few days or a few weeks; but Jesse Law was content.

And, toward dawn, his contentment, his satisfaction with things as they were, was appreciably increased. One of the sheep men had found the horse that Shorty—by now they spoke of the man who had led the way and vanished, as Shorty—had ridden here from Spanish Hacienda. The poor brute looked a wreck, ridden relentlessly and lamed in the mountains; the sheep man found it in a pine timbered cañon near Bates' ranch. The saddle and bridle were gone and he found no trace of them.

"Guess Shorty planned to get a fresh horse out of the Bates string," said the sheep man. "Guess he's got the saddle and bridle hid somewhere, watching a chance. Guess he's pretty anxious to keep out of the

way himself. Guess we'd better keep our eyes peeled, huh, Law? Guess—"

"You're one great little guesser, Jansen," said Law. "I'll add just one to your string: I'll bet you didn't go poking far in the cañon, looking for the saddle!"

Jansen grinned.

"I've had one run-in with Terril," he returned. "I'll go slow stirrin' him up next time."

"But it was Shorty's horse you found."

"What's the difference? Him and Terril are stringing their bets along together, ain't they? Stir up one, stir up both. I'll go with you all right; single-hand, nix."

Law organized his men, drove the search and found the saddle. It was hidden under a log among bowlders, some few hundred yards from the Bates corral. But no sight of Shorty was granted them.

Meantime Vega awaited her father at the hunting lodge, Casa Primavera. For a time a nervous restlessness, an agitation which she could not control, made her unconscious of any sense of fatigue, and she found her only relief in moving about constantly. She walked up and down in the cabin's main room; she lighted other candles; she went through the several rooms, looking at everything as though it had some meaning which baffled her, and yet at the end she would have been unable to tell what she had seen. From the living room into the first bed room, through it into the second; into the kitchen, back through the bath and again into the living room. Would her father never come? And, when he did come, would he explain? It seemed to her that she was being crushed by the Unknown that rose all about her in black tragic walls. That the black walls were always moving, drawing closer, immuring

her in an ever narrower, closer and more breathless horror.

She shivered as with a chill, and then without warning, weariness bore her down. She sank with a little moan upon the bed in the first room and covered her face with her hands. And at last the utter and perfect silence, added to the physical weariness of her long ride and lack of sleep, quieted her and pressed her eyelids down, and she drifted into a serene unconsciousness.

When, a little while later, Don Luis and Molinar returned to the cabin, she did not hear them. But presently their voices aroused her. The men spoke so quickly, so sharply, though not once in loud tones, that she awoke to comprehension of what they were saying. The first utterance to make clear meaning in her mind, still confused and heavy with sleep, was from Molinar.

"But look you, Don Luis, this is all a mystery to me! And you tell me nothing! The man back there at Spanish Hacienda, that impertinent *gringo,* said it was Bill Smith! What did he mean by that?"

"The man is crazy!" exclaimed Don Luis testily. "You know as well as I, Don Fernando, that Smith was killed."

"Demonio!—Well, I thought so. But a burned body—Who can tell for sure, señor?—And that other man, the one they now call Shorty! What of him?"

"Have I not told you I know nothing of him?"

"If it should be Smith!" Molinar's hard white teeth clicked; then she could hear the molars grinding. The man was in the grip of some powerful emotion which only mystified her further and appeared to amaze Don Luis, who cried out queerly:

"What have you to do with Smith, my son?"

"If that man lives—If he has fooled me!—What have I to do with him?" Molinar laughed savagely. "You answer that question! Do you hear me? It is Smith and I know it. You know it, too! You were hiding him; you were trying to let him escape. Tell me why! Tell me where he is!"

"*Por Dios!* It is you, now, who are mad!" said Don Luis angrily. "What interest can you have in such a man? And do you not hear me tell you, I know nothing of him? *Nada, nada, nada!* All I know is what you know; and that Rapidan, with his wild tale, is crazy."

"But I ask you again, then, who is this Shorty?"

"Shall I tell you again that I know nothing of him? Some Mexican who happened to be there, some friend of one of my *vaqueros,* how shall I know?"

He turned then to see his daughter coming slowly toward them through the shadowy adjoining room.

"Vega?" he exclaimed in surprise. "You here?"

She came to his side, forcing a smile.

"*Si, papa mio,*" she returned gently. She took his hand and patted it, noting with a chill at her heart how haggard he looked, how drawn and set his mouth was. "And we are going to have breakfast together, *no?* There is always something here; coffee at least."

"Yes, yes," he returned absently, putting his free hand to her head and smoothing her hair tenderly. "Yes, my little dove. We are going to have a good breakfast together, just the three of us. Eh, Don Fernando?"

Don Luis, too, smiled; his eyes cleared, such was the effort he made, and brightened and looked untroubled. Molinar only stared wonderingly at her.

"You two," continued Don Luis laughingly, "may

have a nice little chat together, while I go have my *cigarita de la mañana.* My first for the morning. Just think of it, there had been so much madness in the air that Don Luis Alarcon has forgotten to smoke! I shall be outside, walking up and down. What a beautiful morning! And I'll rejoin my children for coffee."

He playfully patted her head, made them his little bow and stepped jauntily out through the open door; snatches of a gaily hummed little Spanish song floated back to them.

"What do you do here?" Molinar asked hurriedly. "When did you come and how? Alone, señorita?"

Her father had asked her none of these questions. He had made a fine pretence at being quite himself, yet what a turmoil his mind must be in, not to demand all this of her?

"But you do not answer me, señorita!—Are there more secrets then?"

He said it lightly and with a smile, but his eyes were serious enough.

She went to the lamp which still burned on in full daylight and extinguished it; the candles had guttered and died out.

"Secrets?" she repeated, with the slightest lift of her brows. "Why should it be secret?"

"I was joking, of course. But, seriously, when did you come? And may I ask, why?"

"I came in the middle of the night; what time, I do not know. Mr. Rapidan was coming and I rode with him—"

"Rapidan! That—that—"

She made no endeavor to help him to an epithet that might be allowed in a lady's ears nor did she make any answer. She merely regarded him coolly, as from

a distance, awaiting anything he might have to say. And, despite that coolness of her American eyes, there was just a flicker of warning in them; this happened to be no hour for any man to dictate to Vega Alarcon. But Molinar, recently strangely perturbed, was in no mood to take warnings. His dark face flushed and he bit his lips to hold back the first words leaping to them, words whipped up from his very soul as Rapidan's name was mentioned.

"That low-bred ruffian," he concluded with but indifferent control. "To ride with him? But he is no fitting escort for you, Vega!"

"Shall I not be the one to choose, then?" she flashed out at him.

"But this man! He is of the lowest. He is suspected already of more than one unsavory thing.—You saw," he burst out, since the thing rancored so that it must find vent in some form, "how he took a coward's advantage of me—"

"I saw," she said briefly.

He flushed hotter than ever and his brows came down angrily. Her meaning had run on when her words had stopped. She had seen—

"I have promised the man a horse-whipping if nothing else!"

"Who better than you at horse-whipping?" she said scornfully.

"And you mean to tell me—"

"Shall I tell you this one thing, señor?" she said sweetly, being stirred strangely and beyond her own understanding. "I have heard the tone you employed just now with my father. I think that surely he was occupied with other matters, else he had not tolerated it. Nor shall I, señor."

"Señorita! Vega, I am sorry! The man angers me. I did not mean—"

She threw up her head and turned her back on him, going through the house toward the kitchen. And she, like her father, sent back a very careless little snatch of song to further inform Don Fernando Molinar that she was really as gay as a cricket.

No girl ever knew less of breakfast-preparing than Vega Alarcon. Who was she that she should be concerned with kitchen utensils? There was a wide and deep chasm between an Alarcon and a servant.

But Vega Alarcon, once having decided that a thing was to be done, was exactly the person to see that it was done. Had not a king, once upon a time, watched wheaten cakes cooking? To be sure he had let them burn, but he had established a precedent.

Here was coffee in a tin; here water and fire-blackened pots; here a stove and matches. *Bueno! Vamos a ver!* One sticks paper and wood into a stove and puts a match to it; one manages to get a splinter in her finger and much black on her hands, but never mind; it is done. *Mejor que mejor.* This is nothing; any one can put water in a pot, the pot on the fire and coffee in the water. As simple as setting a match to a fuse; things will take care of themselves now.

Pero, it was something to do all that—and sing at the same time! Her father had struck the proper key; an Alarcon might laugh even while the world came tumbling down. An Alarcon took blows standing up. Vega sang liltingly:

"Ah! que bonitos
Son los enanos,
Los chiquititos
Y Mejicanos.

Sale la linda,
  Sale la fea,
Sale el enano
  Con su zalea!

Los enanitos
  Se enojaron,
Porque á las enanas
  Les pellizcaron.'"

It was very touching; "the little men-dwarfs were angry because some one pinched the little lady-dwarfs!" Let us have gallant courtesy or nothing—unless it be something to add to our coffee for breakfast. Vega ransacked the cupboards; there were a few tins left here; haply, peaches and pears. She put the cans unopened on the table; a man's work, obviously to open them. She sought high and low, hoping to find sugar and milk. There were doors under the cupboard shelves; she opened them and came upon a couple of boxes containing an ample stock of provisions: everything. There was even cheese, not dried out as it would have been were this a store left here by her father some months ago; but fresh. It had been brought here but a few days ago. That was strange; her father did not keep a caretaker at Casa Primavera. Who, then, had been living here?

It was not a lively breakfast though both Alarcon and his daughter strove bravely to make it so. Don Luis vowed that there never was such coffee, smiling at her and meaning to compliment her; doubtless, not to compliment any one, there never was. He praised it but did not have his second and third cups.

Molinar added nothing to the brightness of the morning; he was preoccupied and moody. Vega, at

times when he did not observe, looked at him keenly as though making fresh appraisals. He had always been smoothly elegant, meticulously courteous, displaying to others the face and manner he would have been contented to see in his mirror; always, until his horse had fallen at the fence and his passion had broken its chains, and until now that he could not entirely beat the savage beasts of his emotions back into their hidden cages. Vega saw in him a man whose mask had slipped. And she knew that never until now had she seen the man himself, only the mask. Something of what Rapidan had gleaned earlier, suggested it to her now: He would beat a horse—or a woman. Under a usually smooth exterior were cruelty and viciousness. There was the look of one just awakened in her eyes. She had been drifting—drifting; as a little boat, on a placid sea, may drift along toward sharp-edged rocks just under the surface. What if some day she had been borne along so far as to marry this man? Not because she had ever loved him; merely because an Alarcon owed it to the world to mate with such as a Molinar! She shuddered.

"I notice you still limp a little, Don Fernando," observed Alarcon as they quitted the table.

"That fall I had," said Molinar. "It still irks me.—You, too, Don Luis," he added. "A very slight limp, *no?*"

Alarcon thrust out his left leg, regarding the new boot critically.

"These boots of mine," he said thoughtfully. "I am afraid that they are not well made. I begin to think that my boot-maker takes an advantage of me."

Vega laughed at him.

"Ah, papa mio! You grow vainer all the time! Each year, I vow, your boots grow smaller."

"All Alarcons have small feet," said her father gravely. "In that there is nothing to laugh about, Little Dove."

Vega sighed. No, there was nothing—nothing in all the world that lay dark in the sunshine—to laugh about. Again the black walls rose up and began closing in all about her. They shut out the sun. Well, that was nothing! But they shut out her father, too; she could feel them rising between her and him. She could understand nothing of all this—but she could fear.

CHAPTER XX

WHEN Alarcon, stiff with indignation, exclaimed: "But you become high-handed, Señor Law!" the sheriff rapped out at him: "Glad you see it! There is just one man in these mountains to say what will be done and what won't be done. That's Jesse Law."

It was when Law had requisitioned every horse in the Blue Smokes Mountains. The three Spanish Hacienda horses, Black Diamond, the horses from the Bates ranch and the two other ranches to the east; even the sheep men's pack animals. They were kept in the Bates corral under guard; and no man mounted except at Law's permission.

"You're a big man, Mr. Alarcon," said Law as he saw how Alarcon's face reddened angrily. "But in the eye of the law, at least in this part of the world, there's no difference between a giant and a dwarf. And it's you're own fault if you're bottled up here. You know things that I don't know; you could help me and won't. Am I to trust you, then? Not for one little minute! Nor your little friend, Molinar neither. Nor Rapidan. The whole crowd of you, like it or not, are going to head in where I tell you to. Later on, if you care to, maybe you can make trouble for me; not now. By the Lord, if you drive me hard enough, I'll slap every man jack of you under arrest and keep you tied up until I get where I'm going."

Alarcon had himself perfectly in hand before the other had finished. At the end he inclined his head gravely.

"I seek always, señor," he said calmly at the end, "to

accept gracefully the inevitable. Later on, perhaps, I may have the rare pleasure and privilege of making you regret that you were ever born."

And he stalked off, as pompous as Law had ever seen him. The sheriff looked after him narrowly.

"Yes," said a drawling voice at his shoulder, "he limps off the left leg. Well, so does Molinar. Wonder if Shorty does? Seems to be all the style."

Law turned to transfer the keen glance of his eyes to Rapidan.

"You heard what I said to him."

"About horses? That's all right with me; I don't need Diamond just now; wouldn't take a chance laming him in these Blue Smokes rock-piles. By the way, you've another of my horses at the Bates place; the one Terril rode off from Honeycutt's. But speaking of left-leg limps, there's one more man you'll be bound to suspect of the Nacional robbery. When you come up with him. Name's Jim Terril."

"What are you giving me, Rapidan?" demanded Law sharply.

"Just a tip. So you'll be prepared for it. Of course you'd like to blame Terril for anything you can't hang on anybody else. He's got a gun wound in his left leg —but he got it up here, mixing it with Bates and the sheep men."

"What do you know about it?"

"All there is to know," Rapidan told him coolly.

"So you've seen him since that? And you know where he is now?"

"What's the good after all of my telling you anything, Law? You won't believe unless it just fits in with your slant at things."

And Law looked as curiously after him as he had

after the departing Alarcon. Well, he let them run free, all of them, so long as they did not try to run too far; taking all horses away put them, so to speak, at a tether's end. The Blue Smokes were their grazing ground; no man of them all was going to try to cross the desert on foot. And though Law knew little of Rapidan and trusted him not at all, yet he did recall that Rapidan had sought to stop Shorty's flight back there at the Hacienda, and appeared now set on hunting Shorty down. Good luck to him in that, if in nothing else!

And though Law did not trust all of his assistants in all things, he did feel that almost to a man they stood with him in a desire to form a closer acquaintance with Shorty. Rapidan, certainly, and equally certainly Molinar who, though he offered no reason for his interest, hunted the cañons and bowlder fields indefatigably, Molinar suddenly become predatory, a wolf-like man. When Law strove to draw him on the subject, Molinar merely shrugged and said: "It may be a man I know."

Rapidan followed the little winding path down the cañon, heading toward Casa Primavera. It was late afternoon, the low sun casting heavy black shadows here under the tall peak which rose nakedly above the pines, and there was nothing to be gained by questing up and down by dark in a country like this. He carried his rifle in the crook of his right arm; his eyes, hidden under the brim of his hat, were very watchful. Sooner or later he'd jump his man up; one never knew when the time might come. But now he was considering a day's work done. He had left his little pack of food down at the creek near the cabin. But he was not thinking altogether of that.

Vega Alarcon was alone, sitting dispiritedly on the door step. She rose and turned quickly at the first sound of his step, startled. Such little things made her nerves jump to-day!

When he stood at her side, his lean, hard face softened to a quizzical half-smile, a queer suggestion of tenderness mitigating the severer lines of his lips, she looked searchingly up into his face. He had bared his head as she turned toward him; the evening breeze stirred his dark, crisp hair softly.

"Well?" It was only when at last her eyes fell away from his that he broke the silence. "What do you see?"

"I see a man who comes a Stranger to us all. Every stranger brings something of mystery with him, doesn't he? I see a man who has his own secrets—and who knows how to keep them locked tight in his own breast."

"Speak on, Gypsy Queen," he said, his half-smile unaltered, so that one could be assured neither of his gravity or levity. "Is that all you see?"

Her lashes trembled, then flew upward as she looked at him again. She spoke more swiftly, though her voice grew even lower:

"I think that I see a man who stands by his friends, señor!"

"I hope so. You're thinking about Jim Terril now? Well, I haven't double-crossed him so far, have I? A thousand dollars, easy money, on him, too! Think of that. Tempting, isn't it?"

She frowned, not approving the words. He chuckled softly.

"Don't bank heavy on me, after all?" he added. "All right as a friend to Terril—but a long jump outside your own friendship! Is that it?"

The intensity of the look she turned on him then surprised him. He saw how worn and weary she was; he saw the troubled shadows in her eyes.

"There are times, I think," she said in utter frankness, "when all of us need friends."

"You!" he exclaimed. In his turn he surprised her with the sudden rush of pure boyish eagerness in eyes and voice.

"The Alarcons," she replied, striving for a quiet dignity which came not without a flutter in it, "have ever found the way to fight their own battles, señor. Yet—Oh!"

It was all there, in that little, nearly smothered, "Oh!" She was tired and nervous. Most of all she was frightened. She was oppressed and she was very, very lonely. She had no one. Her father was away all day; when she saw him for a moment or two there was that wall between them. She was shut out—from something! There was Molinar; he could not get his mask back in place; never, never could he quite hide what she had glimpsed twice and now would always see. There was only herself, groping in the dark—and growing afraid to have the light come!

"See here!" said Rapidan emphatically. "You're half dead for sleep and the other half starved, I'll bet a man! That's no business. I've a pack of food down by the creek—"

"There is plenty in the house."

"But you haven't eaten a thing! Have you?"

Despite the manner he began to assume, one of dictating, the last in the world for her to tolerate, she smiled at him then. For it was so clear what his intentions were.

"I tried to make coffee this morning—*Uf!*"

Her "Uf!" set him chuckling again.

"I was just on my way to supper. If you have plenty, and care to invite me in, why, then, I'll make you such a cup of coffee as never was!"

"That is what papa said of mine—"

But she yielded to the strong, heady temptation to invite him into Casa Primavera. She did not want the coffee; she had no faintest desire for food, yet—

"Will you honor me, señor, at a supper—which you will prepare?"

So swift was the change in her, so in an instant did she lightly fling off all sober, oppressive thoughts, like one tossing aside a black mantle to shine forth in gay colors and silver spangles, that Rapidan stood looking at her as he had looked when he had seen her for the first time; as he regarded the rare beauties of a rare and beautiful world, sunrise and sunset and starry sky. She colored warmly and, after the Spanish style, cast her eyes down. But in another moment, head high and rather serene and altogether defiant, she led the way into the cabin. Nor, this time, did she cry out: "Impertinent!"

"Lord love us," cried Rapidan when they came to the kitchen. "What a mess. You ought to fire your kitchen maid and hire new help."

"She is fired, then, señor," laughed Vega. "She is I, a lazy, incompetent thing."

"No wonder you didn't eat." He stood his rifle in a corner, hung his hat on the end of the barrel and looked about him. The doors under the cupboard were open; he saw the boxes of provisions. His brows shot up, as she noted; he was about to ask how all this happened to be here but thought better of it and went to the stove. A glance into the coffee pot brought the

little laughing wrinkles back about his eyes. "Shall we save it, in case anybody wants to write a letter? It would make great ink, wouldn't it? Now, if you'll clean up the dishes, I'll have you a snack ready in two shakes that will make you recall the Ambassador grill."

He bade her clean up the dishes, quite as though she had done such things all her life! And she cleaned up the dishes—exactly like that! She, Vega Alarcon, doing the work of a servant—and laughing over the dishpan! What had come over her? Was it only that, in her terrible, almost tragic loneliness, she welcomed any company and any thing to occupy her?—She sent several sidelong, vaguely puzzled glances at her companion. She neither knew quite what to make of him—or of herself. All that she knew of him, really knew, was what she had discovered in his attitude toward Jimmy Terril. She credited him, in this instance at least, with a fine, sturdy honesty. And honesty was a solid, foursquare block on which one might build, up and up—

Rapidan's cooking was nothing if not rough-and-ready. Yet when they bore plates and cups and saucers to the kitchen table and sat down facing each other, it was as though the good fairies had tapped every dish with a wand. The coffee was good and did her good. She had not thought to eat, but the viands tempted and the simple, hastily prepared meal was as fine as a feast. She sighed once or twice; she began to relax. This man was so quietly yet so strongly confident in his bearing, so calmly assured in his attitude, so gently masterful toward circumstances, that something of his steadiness reached out to her spirit and lifted it up. She knew intuitively that he had his own secret problems, and that he grappled with them singlehandedly. It was

hard to daunt a man like that. He was set in some purpose, like steel gripped in concrete; he was not to be shaken. It was hard to be afraid of life itself, while he bent his clear eyes on hers.

"I am afraid I have been nervous—and frightened," she smiled at him. "You have done me good, Mr. Rapidan." (Oh, that, very nearly, "Rah-pee-than!")

"I know." He nodded gravely. "There are things in the air. And it was a long ride last night, and you need sleep.—Don't you think you'd better clear out of all this? Law would let you have a horse in the morning and you could go back to Spanish Hacienda. This is no place for you."

"But I am going to stay! My father is here and—"

"Law might let Don Luis go, too. The two of you can do nothing here."

"*Might?*" she repeated swiftly. "By which you mean also that he might not? That he would keep my father at hand?"

"Why should he?" asked Rapidan as innocently as he could. "The sheriff has enough men here, I'd say, to do his work."

"But why does he take my father's horse away from him with all the rest?"

"Law has to be careful. He is taking no chances of a horse falling into the hands of the man he is hunting."

It was more than that, she knew. The sheriff distrusted Alarcon as he distrusted others.

"You want me to be away," she said, looking fixedly at Rapidan. "So that when—something happens, I'll be far from it! My father, too, you would have at a distance, if possible!—Oh, what is this thing that is going to happen? Tell me, señor; tell me!"

"Steady on!" he admonished and smiled back at her. "You're just getting your courage back, you know; don't let it slip you.—Haven't you ever noticed how everything always works out all right in the end?"

He went to the stove for a second cup of coffee—and to give her a moment alone, without his eyes upon her. It was growing dark now and he lighted a candle; when he left he'd leave behind him all the cheer he could in the form of a companionable little candle flame. He would give very much to be able really to comfort her, to assure her that in the end everything was going to be all right. But he himself could foresee so little of what was going to happen; that in the end Shorty would be run to earth, that Shorty would prove to be Smith-Gerlack—but what then? What menace in this to her—through her father? Suspicion was both lively and very dark; certainty still veiled her face.

"Hello!" he said queerly. "Who's throwing money away?"

He had taken down a small box from the shelf, getting fresh candles; a yellow fifty-dollar bank-note, slightly crumpled from being caught between the box of candles and some tins, caught his eye. He brought both candle and money back to the table.

"A funny place for it," admitted Vega, with no very great interest. "My father, I suppose. He's so careless with money."

Rapidan gave it over to her and began making a cigarette, dropping tobacco bag and papers to the table at his elbow.—A fifty-dollar yellow-back—a larder here, recently filled—the robbery of the Esperanza paymaster—. Barfoot had told him, "A lot of fifty-dollar bills and small change."

"Shall I smoke?" he asked her. "If you mind—"

"Not in the least. Please smoke."

He thanked her and took his coffee and cigarette together. He thanked her, too, for the meal they had had together, and for her kindness in sharing these few moments with him. He strove then to talk lightly of this and that, to bring into the mountain cabin something of an everyday commonplace atmosphere; to shake off his own graver thoughts and so help to dissipate hers. He coaxed up her smile a couple of times; and once triumphantly won her tinkling laughter with his sheer nonsense.

They went together to the front room and, as he was going, she put out her hand impulsively.

"Good night—and thank you. You have done me a lot of good. More, even, than the coffee."

He went his way, hat in hand and rifle tucked under his arm. She watched until he disappeared in the darkness, then turned back thoughtfully into the candle-lighted house. And for the first time in many hours her thoughts had been forced away from the fearful whirlpool into which they had been drawn, and were centered upon him. She liked the way his hand had gripped hers, strong and warm and friendly, yet with no hint of presumption. She had sat down at table with him, and had forgotten that he was "just a wandering no-body." There had been no grossness to offend her exalted sensibilities; no snatching and gulping and knife-flourishing. Just when she had begun to suspect that the man was "well-bred" she did not know; but she was sure of it now. To be sure he was free and easy and not in the least conventional; yet he did not offend. Did she not know true culture when she encountered it? Could she not tell the gentleman from the boor? A man of the laboring classes, yes; his hard

brown hands would have told that. Yet this was but a matter of fortune, after all; it had nothing to do with breeding. Men were lifted up, men were borne down. A gentleman. One with whom even an Alarcon might consort.

There were a few old books in one of the bedrooms. She would sit and read until her father came in. Strange that he was so late— But, of a sudden determined to hold firm to the more optimistic mood which Rapidan had succeeded in inspiring in her, she clicked her mind shut against empty surmises. Her father would return soon and in the meantime she would keep her thoughts busy with a book.

She was looking over the few volumes on the shelf when she heard a quiet step. Some one coming into the front room. Her first thought, rather strangely since she had just been speculating upon her father, was that it was Rapidan returning for something.

The footsteps came on, very light yet very quick. She turned, half smiling, her candle lifted to throw the light through the door into the adjoining room.

"Is it—"

Her words broke off and she started back with a choking cry of terror. The man in the next room fairly leaped through the door, kicking it shut behind him. A short, thick-set man, crouching and tense, a rifle in his hands lifted and menacing her, his hat pulled low, his face hidden by the big faded blue handkerchief tied just under his eyes. The man Shorty.

CHAPTER XXI

VEGA drew back step by step. The candle in her hand was shaking wildly, its hot drippings falling unfelt upon her fingers. She could not see the man's face—but she knew the man! The thick, massive body rank with animal power, crouching, sinister, furtive, making the very air electrical with the emanations of high-charged emotions, was the body of Bill Smith! Bill Smith was not dead—he was here, turning a rifle, short and ugly like himself, upon her breast. Bill Smith, alive and desperate. Rapidan had told the truth; her father—had lied!

"Go ahead," he said in a vibrant, harsh whisper. "Into the kitchen. Slow! I'll kill to-night, if I have to! Understand, girl? One screech out of you and you're dead."

"What—what do you want me to do?" she whispered; she was afraid that she was going to faint and that he would shoot as she fell. The air seemed to reek with lust of murder.

"Slow. Into the kitchen. Pull down all the shades and shut the doors. One false step and I'll brain you.—You fool—"

"I am going," she said hastily. "I will do what you say."

She was afraid to turn her back on him and so stepped backward through the door, and through the second bed room and so into the kitchen. Step by step he followed her until he came to the kitchen door

where he paused, waiting for her to draw the shades and shut the outer door. Then he came on into the kitchen and again kicked a door shut behind him.

"I'm hungry. You wouldn't know what that means!" There was a sneer in the harsh whispering voice. "God! I'm damn' near starved. Quick, girl."

He sat on the edge of a chair by the table while she hurried to wait on him. He had to tell her to put down the candle and use both hands. She put the coffee pot, still hot, before him and he drank a cup with a rush, without milk or sugar. As she set dishes on the table he placed the rifle among them, in front of him and hardly an inch from his busy fingers, and began eating ravenously. He kept his hat on, pulled down low; he did not remove the handkerchief over his face but kept shoving the food up under it. Now and then the candle gleamed in his eyes; they were black, they looked like beads—little bestial brutal beady eyes, reflecting the light like jet.

"Who was that man?" he mumbled, mouth full.

"What man?"

He turned to glare at her.

"The man that was here just now—keeping me waiting, the—. The man that left *that* behind him."

"That," was Rapidan's tobacco and papers, still on the table. The very sight of them steadied her. It was not alone that they recalled his quiet forcefulness; they put the tingling hope in her that he might miss them and return at any moment.

"It was Mr. Rapidan," she answered.

He said nothing but went on eating; like a dog, gulping food down without chewing. No, she had never really known until now what hunger was; she had never dreamed that a human being could eat like that.

He filled her with loathing, yet held her fascinated eyes.

"Get me more food. There's plenty in the boxes, under the cupboard. Make a package of it. There's a canteen hanging behind the door; fill it up for me. I'm going in a minute. Hurry, can't you?" he snarled, more than ever dog-like.

"Yes, yes! I'll do what you tell me—" He knew of the provision boxes; of the canteen behind the door—he was the one who had lived here—*And her father knew!*

"You fool, I can't take all that with me!" he snapped out at her. "Throw those cans out. Dump the rest in a dish towel; tie up the ends. Listen to me, you damn' white-faced kitchen-bitch— Are you listening?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm listening. What is it?"

"You're to get out of my way in a minute. I want to be here alone, understand? And you're not to tell any one I'm here. I'll kill you if you blab; I'll kill any man that comes.—Drive me, would they? By God, I'm ready for the whole works! I'd rather kill than eat—and you see how starved I am."

"Yes, I'll go now. I'll not tell—"

He leaped forward all without warning and caught her by the arm, his other hand snatching the gun from the table.

"Sh!" he whispered in her ear. "Some one's coming now! Be still, or I'll bash your brains out."

She could not have uttered a sound then had she willed to call out. Her throat was constricted as though it was about it instead of about her arm that the fierce fingers were locked. She heard a step outside; Rapidan's step. He came to the front door and knocked.

"He's come back for his makings," the masked man

whispered, his lips still almost brushing her ear, his breath stifling her. "Take them to him. Go to the front room and give them to him. I'll be close behind you! One look, one word from you, and I'll kill the two of you. Him first, you next. You can tell I mean it, can't you?"

She knew full well! She tried to shrink away, but still he held her. Her arm was icy save where his fingers touched; there the flesh quivered and burned as under coals of fire.

Again Rapidan rapped, more loudly now.

"Call to him. Say you're coming in a minute."

"Ju-just a minute, Mr. Rapidan," called Vega.

"Get yourself together, you fool," came the whisper again, with a vicious twist of her arm. "If he sees that something's wrong, he'll guess what it is. And I'll kill the two of you.—Listen; get him out of the house right away. Take the candle in your hand; I'll be in the dark close behind. Get him outside; first you'll stick the candle on the table in yonder, so he won't see too much of your white face. Then you two move off and not too fast and not too far! I'll shoot in the dark—I'll spray lead all over and mow you down. Keep him out there, chinning with him, for half an hour anyway.—And as long as you live, keep your mouth shut about me being here.—Now, go!"

She went from him like one dazed, moving in a dream, with slow, lagging steps. How could she speak, how could she look, and not let Rapidan guess everything? If he guessed, he'd come leaping in—and the man in the dark room, hungering, slavering with blood lust, would kill him. Him and, then her—

"I'm bringing your tobacco, Mr. Rapidan," she listened to herself saying. "Just a minute, please." She

stopped and breathed deep; she made the greatest struggle of her life, a struggle for mastery over herself. "I noticed them on the table. I knew you'd miss them. I know how it would be with papa; if he had left his cigarettes he'd go back a thousand miles for them."

She went on again opening one door after another. She heard a board creak just behind her.

"Speaking of papa," she ran on, "I think he must be coming any moment now. Will you walk a little way with me to meet him? Not far," she added hastily, her voice raised abruptly. "Just a hundred yards, no further. We'd wait there a moment; after a little while, say half an hour, if he didn't come we—we wouldn't wait any longer—"

She put the candle down on the living room table, so that as she went to the front door her face would be in the shadow. Even so she felt Rapidan's eyes bent intently upon her.

"Here is your tobacco," she said hastily. "And now will you go a little way to meet papa?"

"I hadn't missed the tobacco," he said, taking it and thanking her. "I just got to thinking of you alone here. I don't quite like that. I suppose there's no danger but— Well, I don't like it."

She tried to laugh and came near choking.

"There is something the matter, Vega Alarcon!"

"No, no! What could be the matter. I— Oh, I am nervous and frightened and I imagine things, maybe! But you will come with me, won't you? I'll not keep you long."

"There is something wrong! You want to get me away from the house—"

She laughed at him, more convincingly though it was but a snatch of shaken laughter even now.

"Absurd! Why should I want to do a thing like that? But—" Then suddenly her head went up and she stiffened in her bearing toward him. "I do not think, Mr. Rapidan," she said crisply, "that I have ever asked a favor of you before. Nor, in the future—"

"Will you forgive me, señorita?" he interrupted, and his own manner altered on the instant. "It should suffice that you allow me to be with you; and it does suffice—and more. And thank you for remembering my cigarettes.—You think your father will come down the trail?"

They moved away, side by side. Rapidan knew that his suspicions were warranted; she was all excited eagerness to get him to come with her away from the cabin. Well, why should he not favor her? If in any small thing in the world he could pleasure her, was he not more than glad to do it? Nor need he go prying into every cranny of her brain; she had her own rights, her rights to her own secrets. There might be many explanations of her conduct. The true explanation, that Shorty was there in the house, did not suggest itself to him. Who would look here for Shorty?

They walked a little way, and Vega called a halt. All the while she had the feeling that the masked man had followed them; that he was close by; that if she disobeyed in the slightest degree it would be to draw his "spraying" fire upon her and Rapidan. She wanted to run; she was afraid even to walk fast.

"Here—on this log—shall we sit a little while and wait, Mr. Rapidan? How fine the night is. And the stars; look! And up yonder is the one you called your

star.—Vega! 'The falling Bird!'—Is she in danger of falling now, do you think, Mr. Rapidan?"

She laughed again, almost hysterically, and repeated:

"Vega—the falling bird!"

He reached out toward her and put his hand very gently on her arm.

"Poor girl," he said softly. "Up against something pretty stiff, aren't you? And trying to make a brave stand alone!—Why, you're shaking like a leaf! Something has frightened you; you've stumbled onto something that upsets the world, haven't you? Something that looks pretty downright ugly. And, all alone, you don't know what to do about it.—Well, well, there are a lot of things we've got to fight out, each one for himself. But if you think I can help, if you'll share with me—Why, I'd go down to hell for you, Vega Alarcon!"

She did not resent his hand on her arm; nor did she resent when it slipped down and caught her own hand and held it tight. There was so much of comfort and strength and sheer gentle kindness in the contact that she felt heartened by it, grateful for it. She was alone; terribly alone. Her fingers wanted to linger in his, though she was again grateful to him, and sorry, when he released them.

He was thinking of the new stocked larder and of the fifty-dollar bill; he feared she had made some fresh discovery; that she had begun to see more and more clearly to what so many little things kept pointing.

"If I could tell you, I would.—There is no one else for me to go to now. I— Listen!" and she broke off sharply.

"Some one coming down the trail. Your father, I suppose."

She had heard the step and had feared it came on from the cabin. She sprang up, rigid and anxious.

"Papa! It is you?"

"And no one else, my Little Dove," returned Don Luis breezily. "You are alone? No; there is some one with you."

"It is Mr. Rapidan." She ran to meet her father, throwing her arms about his neck, casting a wild glance back toward the house, then pulling his head down to whisper warningly: "You must not go to the house! There is some one there!"

"Eh?" muttered Don Luis, taken aback, stiffening himself as if he sensed something amiss. "Who is it, Vega?"

"It is a man in a mask; a— The man, Shorty, papa! He is desperate. And he is—" She drew him closer; she whispered with trembling lips brushing his ear. "He is Bill Smith—alive and terrible—"

"Sh! Be still," he whispered back sternly. And then, "Does this man, Rapidan, know?"

"No. No one knows."

"Stay here with him. Keep him from coming near!— Move further off with him. And for the love of God, my poor little daughter, lock your lips."

"No, no, papa! You must not go. I am afraid—"

He broke the clasp of her arms and gently put her aside.

"It is necessary," he said quietly. "I am hard driven, Vega. Only by doing exactly as I say can you, if God is good to us, save me."

He went on hastily, erect, purposeful, swinging a stick like a cane. As he vanished in the darkness she

could still hear his footsteps, quick, steady, purposeful. And then, above the sound of his steps, his voice singing softly, his favorite little Spanish song.—Was it sent back to hearten her? Was it sent forward to announce his coming? He had gone in; they heard the door closed after him. It had been like a knife to cut his song off; it was very silent here now.

When at last Vega said a hushed good night—it was only after several candles had been lighted in the cabin and the kitchen shades were rolled up—she went with heavy steps to her father. She found him alone in the living room, his head bowed, his arms folded, his eyes upon the dead coals in the rock fireplace. He turned slowly at her tread and she ran to him. He took her two hands in his and stood looking sorrowfully into her eager, upturned face.

"He is gone?" she whispered.

He nodded and sighed; and then he shook himself and his grip on her hands tightened spasmodically; he drew her closer and held her as though she were seeking to pull away—or as though others would drag them apart.

"My little Vega. My poor little Vega."

"Papa! What is it? What is the matter?"

The look in his eyes frightened her, and yet she could make but little of it. She knew her father for a man of fine courage, of a nerve which she had never known to be shaken, of a will like true steel. What was it then that could move him so? What had he to do with fears which shook other and lesser men? Oh, there was something unthinkably terrible hanging over him to move him as he was moved now.

Perhaps the man, Smith, had not gone after all! Perhaps even now he was somewhere in the house,

watching them, listening to them, with his rifle at his shoulder! Was that it? Was that why her father held her so tight?

"Papa," she whispered in awe, "he is here yet?"

"Do not be afraid; there is nothing, Vega." He dropped her hands with a final tender squeeze; he squared his shoulders like a man who has shaken off the last doubts and will now face the battle front with cool courage. He even smiled a little. "It will be all right, Vega. Never fear."

"He is gone then?"

"Yes. For your part, you have only to forget that he was here at all. You will not remember that you saw him."

"But— Oh, we must not let him go like that! Think—"

He flung up his hand to stop her rush of words; his eyes were hard and stern on her as he said emphatically:

"Let the man go.—I am ruined else!"

"But it is Bill Smith! And Jimmy Terril—"

"Cannot you trust your father, my girl? I shall undertake that the boy is not taken again; or, if taken, that he goes clear. Listen; when they were sending him off to prison in the first place, some one freed him—"

"It was you?" she whispered in amazement.

"It is I who will never allow the boy to be executed."

"But, can't you see, there is more than that! Some man was killed,—his body burned. It is this Smith who is the murderer!"

"Sh! Will you not be still?" he said angrily. "Leave these things to me!"

She gazed at him in bewilderment.

"But—"

His look silenced her. He came closer and said deliberately:

"Yet we must let this man go. Would you know what is at stake? My life, daughter. And more than my life. My very honor."

"Papa!"

She sank down into a chair, white-faced, crushed. She hid her face in her hands and shivered. She knew that her father was standing over her with that terrible look in his eyes. And then presently she heard him stirring about, striking a match, then beginning to hum his gay little air with a fine assumption of light heartedness. Some one was coming and Don Luis had his guard up.

It was Molinar; she recognized his step. But she could not so soon face any one. With a last tragic look at Don Luis she hurried into the adjoining room. She heard him greet Fernando Molinar in his old way, dignity melting into friendliness, a touch of sheer pomposity tinging the warmth of his welcome.

But she knew now what was at stake; her father was not given to exaggeration when gauging misfortune. Her father's life—and that which he held so high above life itself, his honor.

CHAPTER XXII

RAPIDAN knew. The knowledge did not come to him all at once, but gradually; bit by bit and piece by piece, like the particles of a kaleidoscopic pattern, until the figure was complete. Chance words from Vega Alarcon; breathless exclamations; her quick apprehensive looks when day after day men hunted the mountains; her starting at every footstep. There had been some one with her in the cabin when she had hurried him away. That some one was still there when her father went in and closed the door behind him. And now she, as well as Don Luis, was desperately bent on that man's escape. The very letters of the man's name clicked into place: Bill Smith.

Rapidan began even to understand why Smith had visited the cabin, and what had occurred there. It was a bold act on his part, yet shrewd in its boldness. They would scarcely look for him here, and so here he came. And no doubt now he had supplies and water for at least some days.

"If I only knew how much he had taken, I'd make a pretty close guess at the time of his next raid. And it won't be here the second time; he'll strike at the Bates Ranch or at one of the other ranches. And he's about due to make his big play; to get a horse if he has to fight his way through a dozen men, and cut and run for it.—He'll do that before his provisions run out; or there'll be the other raid first, and then the wild stab at a horse."

The days ran on and he saw a great deal of Vega Alarcon. And, because of what he saw of her and read in her eyes, there were times when he was tempted to throw down his gun and have no responsibility in running to earth the man whose life lines were so entangled with those of Don Luis. One did not need to understand everything, one need not see clearly every kink in these interwoven threads, to know that Bill Smith's capture would spell disaster for Vega's father —and so, perchance, for her. Yet there remained Jim Terril. Let Bill Smith vanish, hang Jim Terril for Bill Smith's murder. Rapidan grew very grim about the mouth during these trying days. Vega's eyes struck to his heart. For her father, too, he felt a strange and perhaps illogical sympathy. Don Luis might be a villain and no doubt was; yet he remained something very fine, a man. He bore himself with high gallantry, with an untroubled courage; he remained calm and his quiet dignity appeared to grow with the passing days.

"Thoroughbred," said Rapidan. "After all, blue blood makes for a high head in foul weather as in fair.—God pity the two of them." His face grew sterner, grimmer; there was tragedy in his darkening eyes. "Let him without sin cast the first stone," he muttered to himself. "Who am I to hunt down any other man for any misdeed he has done? Who am I to judge? It were best if I pulled back and went my way, letting these things solve themselves."

It was a moment of weakness and passed. The chips would have to fall where they listed. It was unthinkable, no matter what the result or who was hurt, that Smith go and Terril hang.

Jesse Law, now more than ever, held the hills in the hollow of his hand. He had organized a posse, sending

out for men whom he could trust. Trails were guarded day and night; men always alert camped at the desert water holes. And every man of them was like a hair-trigger, ready at every instant to come to grips with the event which could not be much longer postponed.

A wagon had come with provisions. And a second wagon came up from Spanish Hacienda, the old *mayordomo,* Esteban, in command. He brought not only delicacies for the master and the señorita, but a cook as well, and tents and beds and clothing. He superintended everything; the shadow which fell over the family fell over him no less. His old eyes when they rested on Don Luis were the dulled eyes of pain and sorrow. He seemed sleepless, tireless, doing or ordering done a thousand thoughtful things. And whenever Rapidan came near, he took his snuff manfully and sneezed until the tears rolled down his brown, withered cheeks. He never in the slightest degree overstepped the bounds of his position, yet a great tenderness welling up in him poured out about the two Alarcons. He did not presume, yet he came close to mothering Vega.

"Señorita," he said timidly, "he is a bad man! He brings your father trouble. You understand that, señorita?"

She lifted her brows at him and poor old Esteban trembled.

"Who, Esteban?" she asked, though she knew.

"That man, Rapidan. Do not trust him, señorita."

He needed not to be afraid of her active resentment; she only sighed.

"But do not be afraid, señorita," he added hastily. "Your father is a fine gentleman; he will make everything come out the right way."

"Yes, Esteban," she answered, smiling rather wanly at him. "Even Mr. Rapidan says to me that everything always comes out right in the end."

"I am having a little of the good old wine spiced the way you like it, señorita. You are just a little pale—"

She patted the nervous old hands and fled from the room. His solicitude was so like the quiet-voiced speech of those who strive to bring comfort when there is no comfort in all the world.

There were many hours when she and Rapidan were together. It was strange and she could not understand it, but she did find her little moments of comfort in the presence of the very man who, most of all, she felt was the active menace against her father and so against herself. There was no one else, since with old Esteban she always wanted to break down and cry, and her father was a man encased in armor; and she could no longer tolerate Molinar. The smooth dandy of the border had become to her a grotesque, sinister being with a mask awry on his face. He was nervous and some vicious intent stood too high in his turbid soul not to be forever peeping out of his eyes.

But in Rapidan there was some vague something that was like the still mountains about her; like the desert; like the nobler pines standing still and serene and deep-rooted on the slopes. When he touched her hand, his own was quiet and firm and steady; when he spoke, his voice calmed her; when she looked into his eyes, she saw steadfastness and honesty. She thought that she began to understand him a little; that as fine a thing as tall ancestry could be simple manhood. And she felt that he understood her, and knew her doubts and fears, and was sincere in the great depths of his sympathy. It might be his hand which in the end

brought disaster down upon her head; she had a strange intuitive, prophetical sense that it would be. And so it was very strange that she should find rest only in his company. But it was so. That which emanated from him, in their quiet moments together when they sat or strolled looking down across the wide stretches of desert, when they watched the gorgeous flamboyant glory of the flaming sunsets, was like the clasp of a friend's hand in some beleaguered citadel of enemies. She saw the look in his eyes when they came away from these sights which always put the ripple of ecstasy into his blood, and whispered within her soul:

"He is a Nobody!—and he is fine!"

And she was an Alarcon—and was wandering among quicksands.

"Have you marked how Señor Molinar looks at you?" she asked abruptly.

"Yes."

"And when you are not looking—it is worse, then!" She hesitated, then said with a rush, just a whisper: "I think he would kill you, señor, if he could."

"He doesn't like me," returned Rapidan, looking at her with his little half smile, with a world of seriousness behind it. "Even less, I think, señorita, that you are kind to me."

"Am I kind?"

"You walk with me sometimes. You sometimes watch the sunset with me, as you do now. Yes, you are very kind."

"And he does not like that? Why should he be concerned, señor?"

He laughed, glimpsing Eve glancing out of the corners of her eyes.

"I supposed he did himself the honor to love you, señorita."

She, too, laughed and shrugged disdainfully.

"Once I thought so.—Oh, you may bring sorrow to us, but from one thing you saved me. Yes, you! When he was beating the horse, do you know what you did, señor? Oh, I do not mean that you struck him; it was not that. You showed him to me as he is, as I always see him now."

"Credit me then with one good deed," he chuckled.

"I think that you have done many kind deeds," she said gravely. "For the deeds a man does make him the man he is, *no?*"

"We are all workers of good—and of evil," he told her, quite as grave as she. "When we have done the wrong thing, perhaps we buck up and try to square the account."

"But you, señor! You have never done anything very wrong?"

The red light of the sunset made a ruddy glow across his face; she saw the queer quirk of his lips.

"Did Cain do wrong?" he exclaimed impulsively. "What a man does trails along after him; over the mountains which are years until, if it may be, he comes at last into his valley of peace. What evil have I set my right hand to? To a deed, señorita, which has made me see it best to step out of my old world; to let that old world of mine think me dead and done with. So, when I worked in a mine where many men were killed, I was content to let it be thought that I was among the lost.—You who put such store in a man's name, what have you to say to this, señorita: that, playing dead man's rôle, I have abandoned my family's name."

Bewildered, strangely shaken, she stared at him in silence. His face was so stern, his eyes so hard—

"But this thing that you did—so long ago—"

"Cain's deed," he told her almost savagely. "I shot my brother."

"Ave Maria purisima!" she gasped, shrinking from him. "You killed your brother?"

"Are there not worse things than death," he said harshly. "We were boys; hot headed boys. The quarrel was senseless, but a blaze of fire! He turned as I shot; the bullet grazed his back. At first I thought no great harm was done; so did Ben. But— Paralyzed all these years, señorita. Unable to walk a single step."

Of a sudden he surged up to his feet. She, rising slowly, looked at him as at some new, terrible object seen for the first time; in horror tinged with incredulity. He swung upon her almost fiercely.

"Why do I tell you all this, Vega Alarcon?" he demanded. "Shall I say why?" With a gesture rarely impatient for him he flung out his long arm, sweepingly indicating the red glory of the west. "It is because that sort of thing reaches down into a man and draws the truth that is in him up and up until it lies at the very surface. It is because, Vega Alarcon, those eyes of yours draw it on out of me. Take warning, do you hear? Take warning, Little Queen of Spain! Would you have me love you? Love you as no man ever did, as no other man ever shall?—It may take some men half a life-time to know, to understand that She has come. I am not like that, señorita."

She drew back from him and still back. Then all of a sudden his expression changed; the stern lines vanished, the half-smile returned to his lips and the drawl to his voice.

"The madness passes," he said lightly. "You can blame me while I shift the blame to the sunset and your dear eyes, and we're all happy. Thus we forget. Am I pardoned?"

But she did not forget, and there were other sunsets.

He had sinned. But she asked if it were not merely a sin of hot youth, expiated long ago? If, perhaps, since two enter each quarrel, the brother had not sinned equally—or more?

He was a Nobody. A nameless Nobody. She was an Alarcon.

Yet—there were other sunsets.

What he did with his nights she did not know. He always vanished into the first true dark. He had his own theories; he went about his task in his own way. Some night there would be cries and running feet and the word would leap from mouth to mouth: "Shorty is taken. Rapidan has run him down, and it is Bill Smith!" Her father had said: "It is my life at stake—and my honor." Yet the hand of fate was relentlessly closing. Why did it have to be? Why did it have to be that Rapidan was being used as fate's right hand? She told herself a thousand times that it need not be; there were so many men watching now.

She sat alone, night after night, her eyes lifted to the pageantry of the golden-gloried sky. Yonder shone Vega, so secure in her place. Yet, Rapidan said, in the fullness of time she was "to step down to her true and eternal place in the heavens."

Esteban sought her out, to bring her a wrap, to flutter a moment about her; to retreat silently. Molinar came to her until at last she told him:

"You can see that I am troubled, señor. One, at times, likes to be alone."

He knew already that it was all over between him and her, but he had persisted in the teeth of that knowledge. So now he did not forbear to jibe her, saying sneeringly:

"One likes to be alone? Or with a low-bred adventurer who has nothing but his low effrontery?"

"You speak of Mr. Rapidan?" she said coldly. "He has manhood, señor; he has truth and courage and fine honesty."

"Por Dios!" cried out Molinar, the hot blood in his head. "Once the chance offers—"

"I have told him that," she retorted. "That you, when the chance came, would shoot in the back!"

And so snapped the lengthening thread between her and Don Fernando Molinar. After that they did not speak; they did not eat at the same table; Molinar, sleeping in one of the tents which Esteban had caused to be erected at the edge of the pines, went in black silence about his business. With him, as with so many others, that business concerned itself exclusively with Shorty.

Of Shorty she was so afraid that she was never a moment alone after dark until she locked the doors of her own room. She was drawn closer than at any time since her babyhood to old Esteban; often she had him sit close to her in the still evenings. She had him arm himself with a fairly enormous pistol; she laughed at him and told him that he looked like an old dove going to war; yet she insisted on the weapon. Shorty—she always named him Shorty when name him she must—had come here once; he might come again. He had grown hungry and therefore desperate before; he would grow hungry again.

There came a certain sunset, their last in the Blue

Smokes. They had been sitting on the bare slope of the mountain, looking out across the desert, watching the seeping of richly colorful dyes along the edges of remote cloud shapes and the gathering of faint amethystine shadowy wraiths across the miles of sand, the two of them very still, snared in the hush of evening. . . . How close together they were drawn by that which was far away! Her eyes and his eyes, travelling across the many miles, rested upon the same ecstasy-awaking sight; something went from her in at those gates of the night and was poured back into him; something burst free deep within the man and sped out there and came flooding back into her. Yonder they met freely. If now, sitting so close together, their eyes met there would be in each something hidden, held back. But their spirits leaped joyously out into the heart of the sunset and melted one into the other. She sighed—

Of a sudden Rapidan stirred restlessly and stood up. She did not move. He stood above her, looking down at her, something rioting along his blood. He had warned her. She had not taken the warning.

"Vega!" he whispered.

As his lips shaped the word, so softly spoken that she could have heard it only with her heart, the silence was shattered by a rifle shot. The glory of the moment went out in a flash of fire.

She whirled about just in time to see him drop in his tracks. Her flesh winced and quivered as though she had taken the bullet in her own body. Why, why had not the same bullet passed through her, too, along with him?

Then she saw that he was not dead. He was not even hurt! He had dropped and whipped his rifle to him

from where it stood against the big rock. There was the second shot; from Rapidan this time. And then he turned to her—laughing!

"It was—Shorty?"

"No," he said quietly. "Guess again."

"Molinar!"

"Think so? Well," and he was smiling reassuringly into her blanched face, "we'll know later on."

"You killed him?" she gasped.

"Never even grazed him," he chuckled. "Could have drilled him fair, at that; I can drive a nail as far as I can see the head of it with this gun." He patted the rifle stock; he managed to give to it all credit for any marksmanship of which he might be capable.

"Then—what do you mean by saying we'll know later?"

"There are no haberdashers out here in the Blue Smokes," he told her lightly. "There's a hole in his hat that he can't hide, and so if you see a man with a hat decorated that way—or with no hat at all—you can say, 'That's a fine idea toward keeping a cool head, —Mr. Molinar!' "

"So it was Don Fernando! I warned you—"

"And I warned you!" he told her.

The color came surging back into her white face, but she held him to this other thing.

"But he will shoot again!"

"Not now. The little man is scared half out of his wits."

"How could he dare?"

"There'd be no risk at all—if he were a better shot. No one would know he did it; it could be laid to Shorty, you know; or to poor Jim Terril. And if he had popped me over and it was seen, there's Shorty again, or

Terril, to use; he'd say he took me for one of them."

"Come! Let us hurry."

So they returned to Casa Primavera, Rapidan chatting lightly to blunt somewhat the sharp edge of her apprehensions, yet remaining watchful at every step; she in silence. At the house, where the shots had been heard and had electrified the strained atmosphere, questions were asked; they were answered coolly by Rapidan, saying that he had shot at a target. Which was the truth.

"You will tell no one? Not even the sheriff?" she asked him.

"There is no need; Law has his hands full enough as things are. Do you suppose he'd care two cents if Molinar and I shot each other up? And here is good old Esteban waiting to take you away from me. Good night, Señorita Alarcon. *Buenas noches, Esteban.*"

"You are a strange man, Señor Rapidan!"

"No; only a mad man," he told her softly.

"And a brave man!"

"Only a fool," he rejoined, and went his way among the shadows. And as he went he muttered to himself, "Just the plain, garden variety of common fool." For truly he was a man who had set his eyes upon a star. He, a man without a name, looking at an Alarcon! He loved her; she yearned toward him. They stood looking at each other through the chinks in the wall; a wall a mile high, the wall of her Spanish pride. True all walls, however high, are scalable. But it was she who would have to make the supreme effort, she who would have to come over the obstacle to him, to stand at his side, upon the common earth he trod. And how would it be then, afterward? When she looked back at what she had given up?

Nor was that all. To reinforce the barrier of the wall which her hands built up between them, his own hands were even now digging the foss still further to separate the little lady of the castle from him who besieged her in his heart. He went stubbornly about his self-allotted task of pulling down Bill Smith—and her father along with him.

"It's all in the cards," he said cheerlessly. "Jim Terril has the same right for life, liberty and the pursuit of the unattainable as any of us. The game's made; let 'er roll."

And he began to be assured that the hand cupping the dice of destiny was about to turn down the cup and make an end. He adhered to his belief that Smith had visited the house once and had provisioned himself; he knew that by now those provisions must be running low. At first he had told himself that the man would strike anywhere, the second time, except here. But he came to change his mind. He would come here again,—to-night, to-morrow night, the following night—soon; and Alarcon would be expecting him and would provision him afresh.

And so Rapidan, telling himself in utter, bleak frankness that he was playing traitor to all the best interests of the girl he loved, watched all approaches to the Casa Primavera night after night and all night long. What little sleep he needed he had during the day; the nights were given over to such acts as went with darkness; darkness of night and of heart.

"Let the chips fall where they darn well please," he said to himself a score of times, "we're going to hew to the hair line. It's going to be like running amuck with a sledge hammer in a Venetian glass factory; but it's in the cards."

Just behind the log house was a thick grove of young pines. A man coming in secret could do no better than by this approach. Through the pines was a narrow, winding path; for the sake of silence, rather than break a noisy way through tangled branches, a man could do no better than follow the path. And so it was here, in the depth of the grove, close by the little path that Rapidan took up his nightly vigil.

And to-night, close on to midnight, he heard a cautious step. Not from the first did he doubt who came. This, he knew, was the end. He had but to do a very simple, very direct thing, and there would be one mystery less on earth. A cold steady confidence nerved him. The task, as he had known all along it would, had fallen to his hands. Yes, it would be simple. He'd just have to swing the sledge hammer among the colored glass.

The steps came on, but either the man approaching so stealthily suspected that danger lay in wait for him or had grown abnormally wary. It was a full half hour after Rapidan heard the first cautious step before he saw the man himself. A man crouching as he advanced; a short, squat man. Shorty. Bill Smith. Hefty Gerlack.

Rapidan, standing against a tree at the path-side, could not by any possibility be seen so long as he was perfectly still. And never so much as a muscle quivered until the man he watched had taken a single step by him. Then, giving the man his chance, he called sharply:

"Up with 'em, Smith!"

Smith whirled and fired. But Rapidan's clubbed rifle came down upon his head even as finger hardened to trigger. The bullet went wild. Smith dropped without a sound, his rifle slipping from his hands.

CHAPTER XXIII

THAT Bill Smith fell captive to Rapidan to-night was due to no flaw in the man's cunning, but entirely to the fact that he could not know that Sheriff Jesse Law did not trust Rapidan in the least. For Smith, though his desperation had grown with the passing days, had played his game shrewdly, taking into consideration all that he did know. Two hours before appearing in the wood at Casa Primavera he had made a clever pretence at betraying his presence at one of the ranches on the eastern slope of the mountains; had gone to the length of drawing a shot in the dark and returning it at random; and then had drawn off and made his bee line here. While one of the men at the ranch rode in hot haste to the Bates place with word to Law, and the other man thought to hold Shorty bottled up in a cañon, Smith carried out his plan. Law hastily gathered his posse, to the last available man, and rode eastward; but of this he said nothing to Rapidan or those others in whom he put no faith. Smith's own generalship was no more at fault than Napoleon's in the dark before Waterloo.

As he fell Rapidan was upon him. But Smith did not move; the blow with a rifle barrel had stunned if not killed him. As Rapidan bent closer, fearful that he had struck even harder than he had intended, a slight spasmodic jerking of an outflung hand reassured him. He drew the hand and its fellow to the small of the prone figure's back, and lashed them tight together

with a strong cord which had been ready to be put to this use for many a day.

A light shone out through the trees; candles were being hastily lighted in the Casa Primavera. There was the sound of quick feet, of a window opened, a door flung back, of a scurrying among the tents near the log cabin. That single shot of the falling man's had been like a blow against a bee hive. Some one was already rushing out this way; Don Luis, Rapidan thought,—fully dressed.

Rapidan gathered his captive up in his arms, finding his burden a difficult one since he must carry his rifle at the same time. He had had no intention of killing Bill Smith, and was anxious now to have him in the house and the candle light; at the same time he was determined that no man, Don Luis or another, should stage a rescue, and so bethought him of the wisdom of going armed.

A voice challenged him, the voice of Don Luis Alarcon calling out sharply:

"Who's there?"

"Rapidan," was the curt answer. "Coming to the house."

Alarcon came closer.

"God save us, senor!—You've shot some one! *Who is it?*"

Rapidan made no answer but went on to the house and in at the open door of the kitchen. There was a light in one of the bedrooms and he went on into it, putting his burden down on the bed, then stepping back so that he stood with his back to the wall, his rifle in his hands before him. His eyes were everywhere at once now, hard and suspicious. How Don Luis was going to take this he could not guess. What Molinar might

have to say or think—or do, he could gauge equally little. The one thing in the world which he did know now at last with absolute certainty, the one thing which he sought to contend mattered, was that he had made no mistake in his man. There on the bed before him, already beginning to show signs of returning consciousness, lay Bill Smith. Hefty Gerlack. The man who had thought to hide while Jim Terril hanged. The man, no doubt, who had killed and burned both of Terril's brothers.

Don Luis had followed at his heels and for a moment stood bending over the bed. Now he turned slowly to confront Rapidan, an utterly baffling look in his eyes.

"Now you have ruined me, señor," he said simply. He had gone deathly white; beads of perspiration, started up from anguish, were thick on his brow.

"I think I have saved Jim Terril," snapped Rapidan.

"You could have left that to me, señor. It was I who saved him once, when they were taking him to prison. I had died myself, gladly, rather than have Terril harmed."

Rapidan could only shrug; "the chips would have to fall where they fell." Then, always watchful, he saw Vega, in dressing gown and slippers, come in at one door while old Esteban in coat and trousers, came running in from the kitchen. Vega's eyes, sick with fear, went from the white face on the bed to her father; swiftly and full of heartbroken reproach to Rapidan.

Smith shuddered from head to foot and his eyes, little and venomous, flew open. He groaned and then tried to sit up; the thongs about his hands on which he lay hampered him and with another groan that ended in an articulate curse, he lay back, staring about

him in wordless rage. And then, grown fully, clearly conscious now, knowing well what had happened and in what predicament he lay, he grew violently vocal again, cursing in such fulsome foulness that Rapidan wondered at the man and Vega shrank back as from a shower of physical blows.

Strange that Law or Tipton wasn't here already, drawn by the rifle shot, thought Rapidan, and would have welcomed either now or both. But he knew that Law, like himself, kept a man or two watching the Casa Primavera day and night; only he could not know that a full hour ago the guard had been withdrawn to join the posse tricked eastward. But here came some one, bursting in eagerly; Molinar.

And when Molinar saw who it was on the bed, the look of a raging devil leapt up in his eyes.

"You!" he cried out, hot with excitement and whatever emotion mastered and galled him. "Skunk! Pig! Double-cross me, would you? Play dead to me and— You won't need to play dead any more! Take that!"

But Rapidan, not knowing what to expect from this man and therefore awake to anything he might do, forestalled him. He whipped his rifle over so that the muzzle, not three feet from Molinar's breast, was enough to stop any man not absolutely stark mad. Molinar had slipped a hand in at his open shirt front, but it stayed there as Rapidan barked out at him:

"Pull a gun, Molinar, and I drop you dead!"

Bill Smith, writhing and falling back, began shouting:

"Shoot the dirty dog; shoot him down, Rapidan! He's a man Law wants, too; he's the man that robbed the Esperanza paymaster and shot two men to do it.— A Molinar and an aristocrat? Hell! He's a dirty

greaser, name of Juan Chavez; used to be a barkeep. Don't I know? Haven't I worked with the dirty dog?—Double-crossed you, huh? You're damn' right I did, and to a finish, too! Thought I was dead and stuck your swag in the old place here, didn't you? And left it while you beat it off to Spanish Hacienda to have a nice little alibi! And I got it!—Double-crossed me once, didn't you? Well, you dog, we're even now.—Watch him, Rapidan! Blow the cheap sport's wormy brains out for him."

Molinar, almost as white as Don Luis, began to tremble; it was unmistakable rage that shook him so. He was almost at the point where he would take his chance, kill his man though he be killed for it. Yet the rifle muzzle was even closer now, and he shivered and beyond that did not stir. His eyes went slashing back and forth like a trapped wolf's; his wet teeth glistened and he began drooling at the mouth.

Smith railed on. Rapidan, though he could give his prisoner just now only a small fraction of his attention, realized that he had never encountered any man of a tithe this man's foul venom. Smith even barked out an ugly, reckless laugh:

"I'm done for, Johnny Chavez," he said bitterly. "But I ain't the only one. You'll go down with me and that's going to cheer me along to the finish. I'll squeal on you for all I'm worth; I've robbed you and I've cheated you, and I'll help hang you!—Play blue-blood, would you? Marry old Alarcon's girl, would you?" And his horrible laughter threatened to choke him.

Molinar's eyes, suddenly vacant of all emotion except an agonized pleading, went to Rapidan.

"For the love of God, señor," he whispered harshly, "let me kill him! What you have done to me, anything,

everything I forgive; I forget. Only, for the love of God, let me kill him!"

"Steady there, Molinar!" cried Rapidan warningly. "He's mine. Hands off!"

Don Luis had said nothing. His white face, turned upon Molinar, expressed loathing, contempt—a blazing scorn. He struggled to find his voice. But at last it came, clear as a trumpet, though tremulous with anger. And it was not those other things of which Smith had accused him, but of his pretence to an aristocratic lineage, that drew upon him Alarcon's caustic diatribe.

"So," he exclaimed, "you are no Molinar at all, *hombre?* No true gentleman, but a pretender? Some cheap adventurer, some Juan Chavez, low-bred and presumptuous, who would creep in like a thief at the door of your betters? Do you know, I had begun to suspect that!—I would advise you to go, man, while you may! Faugh! You befoul the air!"

Whatever may have been Alarcon's own concern in the present situation appeared for the moment to be banished from his mind. He seemed to swell with his outraged pride; his eyes flashed fire; he quivered with his tenseness and his uplifted hand, though empty of weapon, actually made Molinar start back.

"Better pull your gun out, as long as you've started to, Molinar," Rapidan commanded. "I've got enough on my hands right now without having you complicate matters. Take it out by the barrel—and be careful how you handle it!—Now, drop it. Now, step back a pace or two."

Molinar's weapon clattered to the floor; Molinar obeyed and stepped back two paces. Rapidan moved forward to kick the fallen weapon under the bed. And Molinar, cheated of summary vengeance, became clear-

thoughted to his own best interests and, just when no one looked to him for such a move, leaped back into the kitchen and sped out through the open door. They could hear him running swiftly outside.

"One man down," jeered Smith, straining at his bonds and relaxing with a grunt of disgust. "Well, Law can pull him in, I guess."

His little evil eyes turned to Don Luis.

"Did your crowing, didn't you, old rooster!" he jibed. "Well, your crowing days are over. I'm down, and I'm pulling down with me every man I can. The higher they go, the harder they fall, huh?—Now, open your ears, ladies and gents—"

"Silence!" roared Don Luis.

"Oh, the good God have mercy!" wailed old Esteban and began wringing his hands and then fell to weeping.

But the others did not notice him. Rapidan's eyes and Vega's and Bill Smith's were all on Alarcon.

"Silence, you say?" grinned Smith wickedly. "I've kept my mouth shut as long as you could make it worth my while. What you got to pay now, my fine buck? Why, you pompous fool, I—"

Rapidan found it in his heart to come close regretting that he had not let Molinar shoot and so make an end. Such rank baseness, such vile rancour he had never met in a man until now. But Alarcon had stopped Smith's mouth with his own forceful announcement:

"It is the end, eh? *Bueno.* An Alarcon is never afraid, my friends. It is best, since there will be things to tell, that I myself told them."

He spoke coolly now, with a fine courage, a man at the end of all desperation. Yet not once did he look

toward his daughter standing so terror stricken in the doorway.

Smith's little cunning eyes widened to their utmost extent. He stared at Don Luis as one might do were he suddenly aware that he had made a mistake in his man. Of a sudden his look changed; he thought that he understood. Alarcon but meant to cheat him of his long coveted glee in telling.

"Oho, you'd talk now, would you, thinking you'd make it sound better'n the truth! No you don't, old high-and-mighty! I'm telling it. This Alarcon here, he is—"

"Silence!" shouted Alarcon the second time, and for the moment did silence Smith, driving him into even deeper wonderment. And taking advantage of the brief silence, Don Luis, very stiff and never looking so much the bred-in-the-bone aristocrat, announced crisply: "I am the man, yes, that the law looks for. Terril did not kill the man who was burned; and Smith here did not do it. For it was I. Yes; that is it. I killed that man."

Vega sank down where she stood, her face in her hands. Only one sound from her, a dry sob. Then nothing to show that she suffered saving the twitch of her bowed shoulders.

"No, no!" cried old Esteban, starting forward. He dropped on his knees; he clasped his hands and lifted them toward Don Luis. "No, no. Not that!"

"You will be silent, Esteban," said Don Luis calmly. "It is I who must speak now."

He turned toward the bed. Smith, staring at him curiously, began chuckling.

"So you want to tell the tale yourself, do you?" he taunted. "Well, maybe you can tell it better'n I can. It makes good listening, old nabob!"

"Who can tell it better than I?" demanded Alarcon with a flash of defiance. "I killed the man. The reasons are mine. I did some other things; if necessary I shall confess them. I care not. It will be discovered that I have needed large sums of money; that I have had to ask for large loans on Spanish Hacienda. Could a gentleman live as a gentleman should, without money?"

He shrugged his shoulders and began rolling a cigarette. Yet not even now did he turn toward Vega.

"Oh, papa!" She sprang up and ran to him. "It is not true!"

"You will tell them, Smith," said Don Luis indifferently, "that I have told your tale for you. That it is the truth."

Smith lay back and began laughing again.

"He paid me to keep out of the way and to keep my mouth shut," he admitted. He turned then toward Rapidan, "Now the show's about over, Rapidan, suppose you turn me loose? There's the man you want, old-blue-blood Alarcon. Who'd ever think he'd been up to all this bloody murder? Put your string on him, if you like, and go get me a plate of beans. His kid girl there can make me some coffee. I'm ready for the big eats."

Don Luis, about to light a cigarette, of a sudden dropped it, leaped back and whipped out a revolver.

"I am not to be taken alive, señor," he said menacingly.

Vega screamed in terror and caught at Rapidan's arm.

"Oh, Señor Rapidan—you will not— If you love me, señor!"

He put his hand on hers and, having thought swiftly, said quietly:

"I am not the sheriff. I took Smith, not for the sake of the law, but to save Jim Terril." He shrugged. "What you have said, Alarcon, I may find it necessary to repeat to Jesse Law. But I am not at the present time in the least concerned with what you do."

Alarcon bowed, as graceful and self possessed as ever in his life and returned the weapon to his pocket.

"You are wise, Señor Rapidan. And just. And now if you will excuse me, señor, I shall step outside for my cigarette alone. I need to think." For the first time he turned to Vega; with a visible effort he hardened his eyes. "You, too, will permit me, Vega?" And bowing, he withdrew from the room. Esteban followed him in haste. His daughter took a step after him, then stopped. He would want to be alone a moment, as he had said. She leaned against the wall; she began slipping down.

Rapidan ran to her and caught her in his arms. She turned a stricken face upon him and gently put his arms down.

"I am all right, señor," she said in a dead, expressionless voice. "In a moment I will go to my father. Now, I too must be alone."

He watched her walk back to her own room and stepped to close her door for her. Then he came to the bed where Smith, having wriggled to the edge, now sat upright.

"Now, you fool Rapidan," and all the viciousness of the man was poured out upon his captor, "suppose you cut me loose? You've heard what the grand duke just spilled. You'll free me—and I've got a notion to half kill you for stepping into my business where nobody invited you. Make it snappy, will you?"

Rapidan regarded him moodily.

"I ought to have hit you just seven times as hard

as I did," he grunted disgustedly. "So I would, had I realized the sort of a poison snake you are."

Smith laughed at him.

"Cut the jabber—and the rope—same time," he exulted.

Rapidan shook his head.

"Don't fool yourself, Smith. For reasons of my own, I'm going to hand you over to Jesse Law. I suppose he'll have to let you go. And at that, I don't know!" and his look brightened. "He'll hang something on you yet! If he can't hang you, I'll bet a man he can send you to the pen. Anyway, talk it out with him. Stand up."

Smith stood up to strain again at his cords until his face grew purple. Then he fell to storming and cursing again. Rapidan put a hand out to take him by the throat.

"Keep your filth inside you, if it poisons you!" he whispered sternly. "Can't you see I'd go clean crazy over an excuse to choke the life out of you?"

"Kick a man while he's down, would you?"

"I might at that," grunted Rapidan. "Considering it's you, Gerlack—I might!"

"Gerlack?" said the other, his little eyes narrowing. "Where'd you get that?"

Rapidan made him no answer as he drove him along, back through the kitchen and outdoors. But he was thinking that after all, when Law had had his chance to talk with Jim Terril, there might be something to hang on this Bill Smith-Gerlack that would exactly fit him.

The two men, both contented with silence, made the two mile walk to the Bates place in something less than an hour, Rapidan driving his prisoner in front of him, watching him at every step. They saw or heard nothing of Molinar or of Don Luis as they left the house;

only old Esteban cowering in the yard, muttering miserably to himself.

Nor, at first, could Rapidan discover any one at the Bates place. The house was dark; when he knocked and called, no one answered. He hurried Smith along to the corral and called again here. And here also, at first, he could raise no one.

"And that's downright funny," he told himself, beginning to sense something wrong. "Law has made such a point of keeping a guard over the horses."

But at last a voice answered from behind the barn, calling out,

"Who's there?"

"Rapidan. Where's Law?"

"Gone.—What do you want?"

"I want the sheriff. Where is he? Where's everybody?"

"Gone," said the voice again. And presently, "Come over here, Rapidan. I'm hurt."

Rapidan, holding Smith by the belt, went forward hastily. And in a few words he had the man's story.

It was Bates himself. Earlier in the night Buck Hamilton, from one of the east-ranches, had ridden up, hell-for-leather, saying that the man Shorty was over there. Law had gathered in all the men, even to little Tip who was down close to Casa Primavera, and hot-footed it to corral Shorty, leaving Bates alone with the horses. And then a little while ago two men—Bates guessed they sure were Shorty and Jim Terril—had showed up and, two to one, had half killed Bates. They had got two horses and skipped out. Lively, too, if you'd hear Bates tell it.

"Alarcon and Molinar!" Rapidan thought swiftly, and was conscious of a stirring of gladness.

And then Bates, coming to, had managed to ride with word to Law. Law had come tearing back here, his men with him; Bates had followed more slowly and had just arrived; was unsaddling now. And since nobody was here it was a safe bet Law had ridden on, trying to overhaul the two men that had at last made a jump for it; Shorty and Terril, of course, and Bates hoped profanely that the two of 'em would be dead come morning.

There was nothing to do, as Rapidan saw immediately, but follow. Except that first he called Bates to come closer; and then struck a match to hold in front of his captive's face.

"Have a look at your man Shorty," he said, and Bates, starting back, cried out, as though he'd seen a ghost:

"My God! It's Bill Smith come back to life!"

"Hold my gun on him, Bates, until I saddle a couple of horses."

He whistled Black Diamond to him; roped another horse at random and saddled and bridled in haste. Smith went grumbling up into a saddle, swearing that he'd square the count, come another day. Rapidan turned for a final word with Bates. He was thinking of Vega Alarcon at Casa Primavera.

"Can you do another little ride, Bates? I'll pay you for it; anything you ask. Take a couple of horses; saddled, you know, down to the Casa Primavera. They may need 'em there now. And tell Miss Alarcon that I sent them, and said to tell her that her father and Molinar had ridden south; toward the border," he added as an after-thought.

And catching Smith's bridle reins, pulling them forward over his horse's head, he said briefly:

"Get yourself set to *ride!* You can do the rest of your cussing to Jesse Law."

They went down the mountain slope at a gallop. Once Rapidan looked up as though to fill his eyes with the scintillant glory of the stars. Then, with a savage jerk, he hid them with his hat brim.

"Poor little Vega," he whispered inwardly. "Poor little falling bird."

CHAPTER XXIV

It was still dark, though the hint of morning was in the fresh air, when Rapidan with his prisoner reached the little wooded hills marking the end of the waste lands and the beginnings of the fertile. Here, just over the hills, was Rapidan's ranch that had once been Bill Smith's; where a man had been killed and an outhouse burned down to thwart retributive justice.

Rapidan was seeking the sheriff but, though not counting upon finding him here, turned in at his ranch. Jim Terril had waited long enough; not another hour would he have to await the double news that Smith was alive and taken.

From a distance Rapidan saw that his house was lighted. He rode more warily now; the last thing on earth to do was confront Terril, armed, with Smith bound. The boy was all raw nerves and resentment; knowing Smith for a poisonous thing, for the murderer of his own brother, he would kill him as a man killed the desert "side-winder." No; the thing to do was to see that Terril had no opportunity to put himself again in the shadow of the gallows, now that he should walk abroad a free man.

In the darkness of the narrow cañon and at a safe distance from the house Rapidan dismounted and forced Smith to dismount. He tethered the two horses; with a long rope he bound his prisoner in the most painstaking security, his back to a tree, the rope wound about him tightly, the ends carried three feet away to

be tied to another tree, well out of reach. Smith's pocket knife he pitched into the bushes. By way of caution, when this was done to his satisfaction, he said,

"Don't make a noise, either, Smith. Jim Terril's not far off, and if he heard you and found who it was—guess the answer."

Smith's cursing voice grew silent. And so Rapidan left him to go to Terril.

But before he came to the old bridge his attention was again caught by the lights in the house. It would take a moment only to discover who was there and it did no harm to make sure of each step at a time like this, when still many things were undecided. His uninvited guest could be—any one; Barfoot or Law; Don Luis or Molinar. He could scarcely hope to come so soon upon the sheriff; but he might learn of Law's whereabouts.

And, as he came to the door, he saw Jesse Law himself. The sheriff whirled expectantly at his footfall. Rapidan entered eagerly.

"Thank God I've come up with you," he said fervently.

"Well?" snapped Law, and awaited information.

"Yes, I've got news aplenty for you. First off—Have you run up against Alarcon and Molinar tonight?"

Law appeared surprised at the question, but answered it.

"Alarcon, yes. He was here a little while ago. Molinar, no; I haven't seen him. Why those two, brother?"

So Law didn't know! Hadn't any idea yet that Don Luis and Molinar were the two men who had raided the horse corral at the Bates ranch! Don Luis had been

overtaken, but had faced it out, and had kept his mouth shut. And now was allowed to go on his way!

And Molinar? Rapidan, remembering all that had happened so recently at Casa Primavera, judged that the fact that the two men struck together at the Bates place was due merely to a chance arrival there at the same moment. For that one moment their interests had jumped together. But, once in the saddle, they would have reined apart. Trust Don Luis Alarcon for that!

"You're doing a lot of thinking all by your lonely, brother," grunted Law. "If you've got anything to spill, go ahead and spill it."

"A minute," muttered Rapidan. "Two men got horses from Bates and hot-footed. Who do you think they were?"

"To answer the last question I'm going to answer," said Law impatiently, "I'll tell you who I know they were. The man Shorty and Jim Terril. And I'm going to have both of 'em where I want 'em inside a few hours. That's a promise, Rapidan."

"Wrong you are—and right you are!" cried Rapidan.

He heard an oncoming step in an adjoining room—lurch, hitch and roll—and here, looking shrewdly triumphant Barfoot put his head in.

"So you've come back, Mr. Rapidan?" Then Barfoot glanced queerly at Law. "Better keep an eye on this bozo, Jesse," he said drily.

"Shut up, Barfoot," snapped Rapidan, scarcely giving him a thought. He stepped by Law to a shelf and from under a pile of odds and ends brought out a phonograph record.

"So you want Terril yet, do you, Law? Well, I'm going to give you your wish. Be careful when he comes,

though; he's heeled and he's hair-trigger to shoot. Step behind the door here. Barfoot, you stand on this side. Nab him from behind when he comes in."

Both Law and Barfoot plainly distrusted him. Yet Law, thinking swiftly, decided on the instant to see the game through, if only to come at an explanation of it. They stepped into their places as Rapidan started his record spinning. "The Campbells Are Coming," lusty with bagpipes and drums, crashed out throught the silence.

Rapidan went to a chair and sat down, facing the door. He began rolling a cigarette calmly enough, though his blood ran tumultuously; his pulses beating away like the Scotch drums. Law must be very quick and very sure; Rapidan, no less, must be ready to do his part. For Terril was armed, be sure of that; and some few degrees more than merely ready "to shoot it out."

The record played to an end and Rapidan set it going a second time, returning to his chair. And now came a cautious step. A board creaked in the kitchen and Terril looked in, saying softly:

"Sure it's all right, Rapidan? There's been men all around to-night."

"Sure it's all right, kid," said Rapidan as lightly as he could. "Stick your hardware back in your jeans and come ahead. It's all right, I tell you."

"I don't like it," said Terril, casting swift glances about. "Too much light, shades up, too—"

But, reassured by Rapidan, he came into the room, slipping his weapon back into its holster. And then, like some great mountain cat leaping, Jesse Law was upon him. And to help Law, Barfoot came lurching forward; and as the three crashed to the floor, Rapi-

dan, too, was with them, and it was Rapidan who snatched Terril's weapon away.

"Got you, Terril!" said Law. "Take it easy, kid."

Terril stood up, and the look on his white face, in his haggard eyes, was the most terrible look Rapidan had ever looked upon.

"You, too, Rapidan?" he said in a voice which he strove mightily to control. "Sold me, huh? Well," and he drooped wearily, all fight and all hope and all heart gone out of him, "it's over and I'm glad. The sooner I'm done living in a world gone rotten with the kind of men I've met up with of late, the gladder I'll be."

And Rapidan saw that the boy hid his face as he strove to keep them from seeing the tears which came into his eyes. For Jim Terril had banked his all on Rapidan, as a true friend; during these latter days, at the risk of his life itself, Terril had kept an eye on Rapidan's stock, had remembered even his flower boxes, watering them nightly. He had been grateful for the chance to do some little thing for the man who did so much for him.

"I'll explain in a minute, Jim, old boy," said Rapidan hurriedly. "Haven't I told you it's all right.—Yes, I claim the reward, Law," he added with a quick inspiration. "I'll know what to do with it."

It would be a pretty little present to Jim Terril later! The irony of it, the superb and altogether delightful irony! The law that had tormented the boy would have to pay the reward, and Terril himself would have to take it!

Law straightened up.

"Rapidan, you're the dirtiest customer I've ever had the pleasure of meeting up with," he said, and spat disgustedly.

"In two minutes we'll talk," said Rapidan drily, and turned to the door. "Keep steady, Jim Terril; I'm going to give you the surprise of your sweet life and keep my promise to make it all right."

"Hold on there!" shouted Barfoot. And to Law: "Hold him! I've got one to put over on him. The man that's been looking for him all these years, the man who saw that old rifle and started asking us questions —he's here! Stop him, Law! He's wanted!"

Rapidan started and stood a moment, staring incredulously. So at last an ancient pursuit had come up with him. Then he shrugged. But of one thing he was determined; he was not to be stopped now, held and quizzed, while Smith remained out there alone. He took advantage of the present situation; Law had his hands full with Jim Terril, and Rapidan darted out through the door and ran back to the dark wooded cañon.

"Stop him!" screamed Barfoot. "The man that wants him will pay any money—"

"He won't go far," said Law, and stood back from putting the handcuffs on a pair of wrists which, at last, were unresisting. "I've got men set so that nobody will get out. South, he can go as far as Spanish Hacienda; little Tip's there to see that no man goes through."

Rapidan could not get Terril's face out of his mind. So, though Barfoot's news had startled him, he thrust all consideration of it aside. The thing to do was bring Smith now; then Terril would understand. And then Terril would have his foot firmly planted on the first of the few purely legal steps to freedom.

So Rapidan ran. Had he been a few seconds sooner he might have prevented what happened; had he been

a few seconds later he would have failed to prevent the other thing, and would have failed to understand.

Where he had left Smith and the horses there was some sort of commotion. As he dashed through the trees, coming close enough to see the blurred forms, he saw that a man was on a horse and was just starting off at a rush. Smith gone free again! Rapidan yelled out and fired at him; but in the dark and with all the trees to contend with he had the faintest hope of hitting anything.

Another man stood where he had left Smith; a man who had just this moment cut the prisoner free. Don Luis Alarcon! And Smith was gone.

"You worse than murdering dog!" shouted Rapidan, in terrible anger. "Do you know what you've done now?"

Don Luis bowed coldly and spoke coldly.

"I have played my game out to the end, señor. There were reasons why my honor demanded Gerlack's escape. And now—"

Rapidan sensed what he was about to do, some chill quality of the voice itself jarring him into understanding. Don Luis had played his game out to the end.

But, as his hand came from behind him, with his revolver in his cold fingers, Rapidan leaped on him and struck his arm down; the weapon fell to the ground and Rapidan hurled it far into the dark.

"Fool!" he cried out. "Think I'll let you kill yourself now? If there's a decent nerve in your body, listen to me. I've just handed Terril over to the sheriff. I was then coming out to take Smith in. You have let him go. Will Law believe now, from me, that I ever saw Smith? He'll go straight ahead—and hang

Jim Terril after all! Can't you see that? Who has seen Smith? You; and you'd funk it and be dead! Old Esteban; will he open his mouth? Vega and I! Law won't believe me, and I don't know if he'll believe her!"

Don Luis, very stiff, said calmly:

"What would you have me do, señor?"

"Go to the house. Tell Terril what I did and why. Tell Law."

"And you, señor? Why not you—"

"I'm riding and I'm never stopping until I get Bill Smith again. He'll never get beyond Spanish Hacienda; but I mean to make sure of that.—Will you play square in this one thing, Alarcon? Will you do what I say?"

Again Alarcon bowed.

"Si, señor; even gladly. If Terril is taken, I will do this for him."

He strode away toward the house. Rapidan ran to the horse tied to the tree and jerked the rope loose. Not Black Diamond; Smith, curse him, was on Black Diamond. Well, it was but a dozen miles to Spanish Hacienda; Smith could not get by there; little Tip would stop him! And close at his heels would come Rapidan.

CHAPTER XXV

DON LUIS ALARCON, erect and steady, though very pale, entered Rapidan's house. He saw at a glance that he had been told the truth; Jim Terril, a dejected, embittered man, sat slumped wearily in a chair, staring dully at the handcuffs on his knees. There, behind him, stood Barfoot, looking expectantly at the door; at Terril's side, Jesse Law very grim about the mouth. And with them a third man, one he had never seen before; a tall, dark, handsome young chap who, like Barfoot, had turned with an eager expectancy toward the door at the sound of Alarcon's steps. Don Luis disregarded both the stranger and Barfoot; he had now to do with the others exclusively.

"Señor Terril," he said courteously. "I am glad to see you again; glad, too, that you are now nearly at the end of so much wretchedness."

Terril looked up at him in lackluster wonder.

"Howdy, Mr. Alarcon," he said quietly. And added, "You're one man, I guess, that was always square with me."

A look of pain came into Alarcon's dark eyes. But he spoke quietly enough as he remarked:

"You may come some day to change your mind about that, Terril; *quien sabe?*" He shrugged indifferently and turned his eyes to Law. "I am here, señor, at the request of Señor Rapidan. To do a small thing in mere justice."

"Justice in a man like him!" grunted Law.

Don Luis inclined his head.

"A great deal, I think, señor. This Rapidan has brought me no happiness; he is the rock against which my fortunes strike and sink. Yet he is a true man for all that, straight-dealing, and square."

They looked at him in amazement. Jim Terril alone tried to laugh at him.

"I know, señores," said Alarcon. "But listen!—Just now this Rapidan gave you over to the sheriff, no? All right. For he planned only to work you much good. Outside he had a man tied; he was then going to bring that man to Law. And that man—that man was Bill Smith, señor!"

Terril's jaw fell and he looked at Alarcon as though at a man suddenly gone mad. Law stepped forward, demanding sharply:

"What the devil do you mean, Alarcon? Rapidan's been telling me some nonsense—You don't mean that Smith has been alive all this time?"

"It is the truth, señor. It was another man killed. Smith has been alive—and hidden. The man Shorty is the man Bill Smith!"

"Good God!" cried Law. "And you—you, Don Luis Alarcon—have been hiding him out on me?"

"The man lives, señor," came the words repeated mechanically. "You shall not ask me more, just now; I have told the story once to-night and, if need be, can tell it again—later. I now wish but to assure Terril here that his troubles are over; and, most of all, that his friend Rapidan remained his friend."

Terril leaped to his feet, a man electrified, and thrust his manacled hands into Law's astonished face.

"It was my brother then who was killed," he cried out in a terrible voice. "Damn' Gerlack! He's killed

Bud too! Let me go, Law; do you hear! Let me go! I'll get him for this—"

"Go steady, kid," said Law, not unkindly. "You'll get nobody to-night.—I begin to see why Rapidan handed you over to me—before he brought his other man in! Good Lord!—Who's Gerlack, anyway?" he demanded sharply of Alarcon.

"He is your Bill Smith. I knew him, long ago, as Hefty Gerlack."

"As Gerlack he killed one of my brothers in Texas," cried out Terril, shaking with passion. "As Bill Smith my other brother, Bud, hunted him down here. I thought Bud killed him—and now, the snake, he has killed Bud too! Let me go, Law; oh, for God's sake, let me go. I'll do anything you say—after. I swear to God, I will. I'll come straight to you; you can hang me, you can do anything—"

"Steady-on, kid," said Law and put a steadying hand on the straining shoulder. "I begin to see a whole lot of things all of a sudden. Rapidan told me—and I simply made the old mistake. I had reasons to set him down as a crook, and so looked to him for a flock of lies."

"And a crook he is!" cried out Barfoot. "I told him so to his face the first day I ever saw him." He flung out his arm toward the stranger who had been intently listening to everything, trying to make what he could of it. "This gent," cried Barfoot, "knows all about him. He's been trailing Rapidan down for years; he'll pay big money to run him down."

The stranger's smile was not to be read.

"I'd sure give a lot to come up with him," he drawled.

"So he's a crook after all, is he?" snapped Law.

The stranger lifted his brows and stared at him.

"He is the one real white man I ever knew," he said simply. Of a sudden his eyes flashed up, warm and eager. "Couldn't you fools tell that, just by looking him in the eyes? Just by hearing the ring of his voice? He's the man to go to hell for his friend, and to go smiling. He is fair and he is square and he is fine! And, I'm damned proud to tell you gentlemen, he's my brother."

Barfoot had pulled his under lip so far out that he gave now the supreme test of its elasticity; it came back with a loud "plup."

"But I thought," he began, mystified.

"That a man who fled on from pursuit was therefore guilty! Of course. Listen to me; I'll make it short—and we'll go find him. As kids we had a quarrel and being hot blooded fools we shot it out. It was two thirds my fault, too. His bullet grazed my back as I turned; and from the shot I was paralyzed. He tried to make up; I wouldn't have anything to do with him.

"Next: Our father had a string of brothers, and not a man of them ever married. They all made money. And, being that my brother was the first boy in the whole family, every one of the uncles gave him a name at the christening—and put him down in the will! I came later, and being number two in the boy business didn't make a ripple.

"Later on as our uncles died, money began pouring in to my brother. He wanted to share with me; I told him to go to hell. He was very rich then and I had nothing. I was mean and sore, and was glad I had told him where to go. He insisted that if I took his money and spent it doctoring the time would come when some medico made we whole again. And, when he saw I wouldn't take a cent—Why he up and vanished—and

in time word came out to us in Virginia that he was dead; buried in a mine accident. His money came to me then; I took it; and, as you see, I am through with my trouble. He was right; it was curable and I found the man for the job in London. And then I got wind that he was alive. So I've hunted him down at last."

"That rifle that I had," muttered Barfoot. "I was sure he had killed somebody with it."

"You're a foul minded devil,"—said Rapidan's brother, very much after Rapidan's own drawling fashion. "It was my old rifle; the one I shot at him with and that I gave away in a hurry to the first nigger boy that chanced along. I guess Rap recognized it and, for some whim, hankered to have it. That's all. But you've done one good job in your life—if I can come up with him this time. It means putting considerable money back in Rap's pockets."

"There's still money left?" queried Barfoot anxiously.

"A few millions," said the other coolly. And, turning to Don Luis: "So there's some man outside whom you are all pretty keen about coming up with? And my brother's with him? Let's go!"

Don Luis who, with the others, had been drawn out of himself and his own troubles for the moment, shook his head sadly.

"He's gone on ahead again, señor. I am sorry. Gerlack, too, has gone." He turned with his explanation to Law. "Señor Rapidan was just a moment too late. He has ridden after Gerlack. And now, gentlemen, having told you all this, I will bid you good evening—"

"Hold on, there!" cried Law, and sprang after him. In another instant, with their sharp click, the handcuffs

were on Don Luis Alarcon. He went white to the lips. "I'm taking no chances from now on," said Law bluntly. "You've fooled me long enough. I hope I can take the handcuffs off you soon—and apologize, Señor Alarcon," he said more quietly. "But, for the present, I'll take no chances."

"Come ahead, boys," called out Rapidan's brother, the most eager of them all. "Let's ride!"

Barfoot stared, began mumbling and finally dropped down in a chair to stare afresh.

"One man running away—to keep another from stuffing 'a few millions' in his jeans!—The other man racing off, to come up with him—to empty his own pocket of 'a few millions!' "

He shook his head. He must have it all wrong, somehow. There wasn't any sense in all that.

"A few millions!"

And shook his head harder than ever.

"Mr. Rapidan," Law began.

Rapidan's brother, smiling, cut him short to explain:

"The name isn't Rapidan, you understand. That's just one of my brother's amazing string of cognomens, gifts of avuncular prideful interest. The real name—"

He hesitated, grew thoughtful, then his smile, much like his brother's, flashed out upon them.

"The real name—I'll leave to old Rap to tell you! I don't mind saying, gentlemen, it may make you lift up your ears! There's not a prouder name in Virginia—No, nor yet in America—Nor, glory be, in the world! You'll know it, when Rap tells you. He has the right to tell you; he's now the head of the house."

He stood looking at them curiously, still smiling. His own head was lifted proudly. He added simply:

"It's the name of one of the finest of the First Families of Virginia, gentlemen; one that's been kept clean for hundreds of years! Does that mean anything to any of you?—Let's go find Rap."

CHAPTER XXVI

In a still pink dawn Rapidan rode to Spanish Hacienda. He had caught no glimpse of the fleeing man, Smith having the head start and the fleeter horse. Yet he hoped, though somewhat against hope, to come up with him at the Alarcon home. For Law had had many men at his command and had strung them out cunningly, sending little Tipton down here to bar the way against all flight, while he himself had thought to comb the hills about Rapidan's ranch.

For one thing, thought Rapidan, Smith would want a fresh horse. And, if it were in the cards that there was still further riding to do—and Rapidan swore to ride on into Mexico if Smith led the way—he himself would have to shift saddle. So he bore straight on toward the Spanish Hacienda.

As he crested the last of the little rolling hills he looked back and saw at a distance, coming on from the direction of the Blue Smokes two riders. Too far off for recognition, yet he guessed who they were. Vega Alarcon and old Esteban, pressing on to follow the fortunes—and misfortunes!—of the house of Alarcon. He straightened himself in the saddle; the thing to do now, as always, was look straight ahead! And thus he caught his first glimpse of another horseman. Some one riding at a running gallop, around the corner of the barn, in at the stable yard. Smith, arriving only now? Tipton or one of Tipton's men?

He urged his tired horse along. Once, above the thud of hoofs, he thought that he heard a sound; pistol

shot? rifle shot? he strained his ears but could not be sure. And so at last he slid from the saddle behind the fence that Vega's horse had jumped—it seemed very long ago!—and ran forward on foot, his rifle ready, calling out:

"Hello! Who's there?"

For he had heard a sound again, one that he could hear clearly; a man's voice, sharp and menacing, though the words had not reached him.

"Hello!" he called out again. "That you, Tipton?"

Instead of an answer there came three or four pistol shots. It sounded like men shooting inside the stable. He ran around the barn and as he did so saw a man break and run for the house. Smith! Glory be, it was Bill Smith!

Rapidan whipped up his rifle, shouting to Smith a command to stop. But the man ran on and Rapidan—about to press the trigger—lowered his gun. For Smith ran like a drunken man, stumblingly. And though he ran on and staggered through the gate in the high wall and so disappeared in the garden, Rapidan saw at a glance that he was badly wounded.

"Well?" snapped a voice close by. "Why didn't you drop him when you had a chance like that?"

It was little Tip, reloading his revolver as he ran.

"He's already bad-hurt," answered Rapidan. "I couldn't shoot him down that way—on the run, too."

Tipton snorted and hurried on into the garden, Rapidan at his side. They caught one glimpse of Smith, rounding a corner of the house, and Tipton shot at him. But Smith bore on, staggering at every step, and disappeared again.

"I spotted him out yonder, and told him to put 'em up," explained the deputy. "He made a break for it

and started shooting." He looked very curiously at Rapidan, as though appraising him anew. "It was Bill Smith, after all," he said.

"I know. I brought him down a little while ago from the Blue Smokes. To my ranch. He got away there."

"Well, his getting-aways are about over," said little Tip with a grunt. And added, "He's shooting to kill, Rapidan. Watch your step."

They saw blood on the front veranda, bloody tracks leading to the door. Plainly Smith, driven to make a last stand, was planning to fight it out behind walls. Perhaps, too, he knew where he could find fresh amunition—or a rifle, perhaps.

Yet neither of the two men following him was to be deterred now by any sort of consideration. They leaped in at the door which Smith had not tarried to close behind him and saw him at the far end of the long hallway, running in at the patio. And again, yelling at him to stop and getting no answer, Tipton started shooting. Smith went lunging on through the door and vanished.

"Takes a lot of stopping, that man," said Tipton coolly.

"You must have missed him clean—"

Tipton tipped his head sidewise, lifting one eyebrow.

"I don't ever miss, Rapidan," he said as one who knew whereof he spoke. "Not a target like that."

Yet they entered the patio warily. A curious little thing; there on the ground lay Bill Smith's hat. Just as Rapidan had seen it the first time he came here. But Smith himself was not in the patio.

They found him at last, when they had searched several of the rooms opening off the patio, and Bill Smith, corroding with venom, tried his best to kill them. But his shot went wild and Rapidan ran in on

him, using his clubbed rifle to knock the weapon out of Smith's hand.

They lifted him up to the bed and he lay there very quietly, steeped in his own blood.

"You asked for it, you know, Smith," said Tipton with a shrug.

Rapidan turned away, throwing open the window into the garden, letting in morning light and air. Smith stirred weakly, sought to moisten his lips and asked for a drink.

"Water?" asked Rapidan.

Smith cursed him for a fool and demanded whisky. And Rapidan, glad enough to leave the room, went in search of it. He saw a terrified house servant, peering out of an open door; but was greeted only by a scream as the door was slammed and bolted. And then he saw Vega and old Esteban hurrying in.

"My father?" she asked anxiously.

"All right," he told her as heartily as he could. And added quietly, "He's not here; up at my ranch, though I guess they'll all be along most any minute now. But Smith is here. He has been hurt; badly. He is asking for a drink—whisky—"

"No!" cried old Esteban, shaky and haggard from his ride, yet flaring up hotly. "Let the dog die! Give him nothing."

"Esteban," said Vega sharply, "go bring some whisky. Quick."

The old man went off as she bade him, though with obvious reluctance. And Vega insisted on going with Rapidan to the room where Smith was.

Tipton by now, at Smith's request, had propped him up with pillows and he saw them come in. His eyes, resting on Vega, burned malignantly.

"You dirty greaser!" he snarled at her. And, coughing and slumping forward and heaving himself up again, he said thickly: "I'm done for, see? Well, that ain't nothing to scare me. I always knew I'd stop lead sooner or later.—Me, I'm Hefty Gerlack, that's what! And when Gerlack goes down, he goes down with plenty of company.—Where's that drink, damn you all?"

Old Esteban brought it at last, but would not go near Smith with it. So Rapidan took it and held it to the parched lips and Smith gulped it down and got a fresh grip on himself.

"I'm done for, huh, Tip?" he asked curtly.

Tipton shrugged.

"I'm no doctor, Smith."

"Well, I can tell. I'll be dead in an hour; maybe sooner. All right then; before I die I'll tell what I know and then I can shuffle off with last laugh. Alarcon is the man—"

Rapidan, seeing the look as of death in Vega's eyes, said swiftly:

"No use going over all that, Smith. It was all told once."

"Alarcon told it—and he lied. From start to finish he lied! Oho, thought he'd trick me, did he? Well he might of—if it hadn't been for Tipton here, damn him. Lied, yes I'll say he lied! And why? Said he killed Teril's brother—and lied! I did that; I'll take credit for it, too; glad to, if you want to know! Just as I killed his other brother, down in Texas. And old Alarcon would have said he did that, too; anything to keep me still.—And why? Why, to try and hide something worse, of course!"

He fell back exhausted. Vega, caught up between hope and fear, found it hard to speak.

"Something worse? Can anything be worse—than murder—"

She shuddered. Smith reared up, glaring at her.

"Yes, worse! Worse for him—Lord High Alarcon!—Remember how he burned up Molinar when he caught him playing he was somebody when he was only a low down barkeep? That was rich! Nearly made me bust laughing. And me knowing, all the time!—Alarcon a blue-blood? He is nobody and nothing! Didn't I know him twenty years ago in South America? He's the son of a servant; a butler in somebody's fine home, and that's as close as he ever come to blue-blood! Son of a butler, and his father—There's his father, shaking, sick-looking! Old Esteban—major-domo—father of the fine Don Luis Alarcon!—And now you know why he paid me to keep my mouth shut! Son—of—a—servant—"

Every eye turned to old Esteban. He stood before them, the picture of despair, his old hands wringing each other.

"No, no!" he cried out. "No. The man lies—"

Vega went to him and put her hands on his shoulders.

"Esteban—tell me. The truth, Esteban. Tell me—"

Her voice broke. She saw the truth in his eyes.

"Oh," he cried out brokenly. "My son, my poor son!" Then he stiffened and said hoarsely:

"But you will listen, all of you. There has never been a son like him, the best in all the world. When—he was a *vaquero* then and we were happy—one day he found gold, much gold, he ran to me. And he said,

'Now, father, we will have everything. We will be like rich people you have always worked for.' And he tried to make me live with him as his father—in all this splendor. And I could not. Oh, I could not! I would not go with him and live thus unless he promised me to let me be what I had always been. And to keep me with him, he did it. And he has been so good, oh so good, señores; you do not know. Kind to all and so generous; kindest and most generous to his father—an old servant.—And now, this will kill him—Oh, my poor boy—"

The tears spilled over from his eyes and ran unheeded down his wrinkled old face. Vega dropped her hands from his shoulders and looked at him wildly. Old Esteban—her grandfather!

Rapidan heard all this in utter amazement. So this was Don Luis' secret! To hide this he was ready to die. Not only to die, but ready, even eager to stand before the world a self-confessed murderer—rather than have the world know that he was no true aristocrat—one, simply, of the serving class! He had builded himself up a tradition of birth; he had lived it for half his life, and in the end it was become more to him than life itself!

"Ya!" jibed Smith, weak, yet strong in evil. "So I pull him down, and the devil take him. They all come down with me! Molinar, too; I've shown him up and—"

"Look out!" yelled Tipton, and fired out through the window as he shouted. A face had appeared there a moment, as evil as Smith's with rage and hate. Molinar's face. And Molinar and Tipton fired at the same instant.

Bill Smith fell back, dead; a bullet between the nar-

row, evil eyes. And Molinar, when they found him, was dead likewise. No, Tipton did not miss; "not a target like that."

Rapidan went quickly to Vega.

"The others will be here in a minute," he said softly. "Come with me. We will go to your father—"

She swayed so that he caught her, supporting her. She only said very gently:

"This—this will kill papa. I know.—Or he will even kill himself—"

They heard steps running down the hall. Before the rest, his hands hidden under a cloak hurried Don Luis. At the open door he stopped, looking at them wildly.

"Outside is Molinar—dead! Here is Smith—dead!"

"Yes," said Rapidan, and turned away from him.

A new look leaped up in Alarcon's eyes.

"Before he died—this Smith—*did he talk?*"

"Yes; he said that it was he who killed the two Terrils; that—"

"Yes, yes. But what else. Tell me, señor, for the love of God! *What else?*

Little Tipton, it would seem, though one who killed his man when that lay in the path of his duty, was a man of a big heart; further, a man of understanding. It was little Tip who spoke up sharply, saying with great emphasis:

"I think he had something else he wanted to say, Don Luis. But Molinar crept up on him—and stopped him. Molinar shot him dead before he could say another word."

A change came over Don Luis Alarcon. Smith was dead—and had not spoken!

"This Molinar," he said coolly, "though it turns out he was a man of no birth, has at the least done one

good deed it would appear. Let us give him credit for that.—My daughter, I shall see you in a few moments.—Esteban, you will make these gentlemen at home? Señor Law, a word with you alone, if you will so highly honor me."

He stood very erect, very sure of himself and of his destiny. With one of his stately bows, with a quiet, "You will permit me, señores?" he left the room. And Law, at a nod from Tipton, hurried after him, taking a key out of his pocket as he went.

Rapidan took Vega's hands in his, to lead her from the room.

"Only we four know, Vega mia," he said quietly. "Tipton will never speak; you have seen that. He is pretty fine, I begin to think. Nor old Esteban; he would die first. And you and I, Vega, we too will forget, will we not?—It is for your father's sake—"

The earth had been snatched away from under her feet.

"Shall we—live a lie, señor?" she whispered.

"It is not a lie—just a dream with Alarcon," he whispered back. "I can't altogether understand—but I can feel how it is with him. Nor must we break that dream for him—it would kill him. And it harms no one, Vega—"

She lifted her eyes to him, eyes swimming with tears.

"Your star, señor—she is named Vega—she is to fall—"

"Only to step to her true place!" he said happily.

Then there was a shout and here, coming down the hall with two hands out and a wonderful look upon his face, came one whom Vega had never seen, yet whom apparently Rapidan knew well. For he stopped

as though turned to stone and at first could not find his voice.

"Ben!" he gasped at last. And, in a hushed voice, *"Walking!"*

Ben caught him by both hands.

"Rapidan, old boy!" he cried joyously. "Run to earth at last! Alive and— Oh, Rapidan!"

"And you—you have forgiven me, Ben?"

"Forgiven you? Don't be a fool! Forgive me first, will you, so we can get started fair. And I've spent about a million of your money and—"

Rapidan remembered Vega then.

"My brother, Miss Alarcon. I told you of him. He —he is well now—You see? See how old Ben walks again! Say, that's fine! Ben himself, just as good as new—and the slate wiped clean. Ben this is Vega; she's going to marry—I haven't asked her yet, I haven't had a chance, there hasn't been time! You see—I'm going in to Don Luis Alarcon now! You talk with Vega a minute, Ben. I've got to ask Don Luis first. And I say, Ben— Didn't I tell you, Vega, everything always came out all right in the end!"

Ben began to laugh. Rapidan turned fiery red. Even Vega, though there was still no earth below for her to rest her feet on, was on the verge of nervous laughter. No one had ever seen Rapidan give way to excitement like this!

Later Rapidan and Ben had a truly wonderful talk together in a quiet corner of the garden. And Vega and old Esteban, withdrawn from all others, wept together. For the first time in his life the old man, tempted beyond endurance by her arms about his neck, hugged her to his breast.

"Grandfather; dear *papa-grande mio,*" she wept into his ear.

He started and looked over his shoulder to the door.

"But no one must know, señorita—"

"I am Vega—"

"Vega, my little one.—In my heart I have always called you that: Vega, my little one."

"Some one is coming!" and they sprang apart like the guiltiest twain in the world.

That evening, after many old questions had at last been answered, while Don Luis Alarcon, immaculate in fresh garments and very much his old time lordship-of-the manor was entertaining Rapidan's brother, Rapidan himself drew Vega out of the house and into the quiet star-lit garden. She went with him, thoughtful, her eyes on the ground.

"Lift up your head, Vega," he urged her. "Look at the stars."

"Can I ever really lift my head again, think you, señor?" she asked him very quietly.

"Nonsense; of course you can," he laughed at her. And then, forced to match her seriousness if only for the moment: "Think, Vega; out of all these dark days we emerge with no harm done to any of us! Your father, you will always remember, has really done no harm to any man."

"Oh," she cried out at last, and her head did come up, if ever so little. "My father? He has been so good, so kind to every one, señor! Do you remember those silly people, Agatha and Marlborough Bowen, whom I commanded that first day to go? They are there yet! My father has kept them for years. He is like that to all."

"I know. Then what is there to bear you down? He plays an innocent game after all, and plays it, God bless him, manfully!"

"But, señor, I—we are not what I thought—"

"You are ashamed of old Esteban then!" he challenged her boldly.

Her head came up in all reality now.

"Ashamed of him? That darling, glorious old man? Señor, I am proud! He, too, is wonderful. He has a heart of gold and—"

"You see!" laughed Rapidan.

Despite all intentions to the contrary Vega smiled. And smiled happily. For she was young and she was made for happiness—and so long as all this upheaval made no difference to Rapidan—and made no difference to her father—and made no difference to dear old Esteban, except to bring him close to her—Why, pray, should she not smile?

They passed in their walk by an open window. Inside Don Luis and Ben walked up and down. It was the room of the Ancestors, and Don Luis was pointing them out, explaining, frank in his pride. Vega bit her lip and turned away. But Rapidan simply swept her up into his arms and held her very close to him.

"I have heard all about you," said Vega, her cheek against his coat, her voice sounding faint and muffled. "Who you are—and what you are; of an old family, very great and very proud; of a name known all over the world—"

They were long in the garden; they spoke of many things but mostly of one Vega and a certain Rapidan. And when the moon rose and found them out, pacing slowly, she could make but the one shadow of the two.

"Come," said Rapidan when it grew late. "We're

going in to your father, the two of us. I can't sleep or eat until he says 'Yes'—and you say 'Yes' again!"

And when they stood before Don Luis, hand in hand, unmindful that Ben looked smilingly on, Don Luis regarded them with great benignity. He listened to Rapidan's quiet statement; he looked at his daughter's rosy face and smiled.

"I have talked with your brother," he said to Rapidan. "From him I understand that you are, financially—"

"'Bout seven millions left," chuckled Rapidan's brother.

Don Luis waved his hand as at a matter which, after all, was of lesser moment than certain other matters. Though, as Rapidan learned later on, Spanish Hacienda was mortgaged up to the hilt, what was that? Money was not the great thing.

"No, money is not all," went on Don Luis, serene in the grand manner. "But on all points I am now assured. Your family, I learn gladly, is one worthy to unite with that of Alarcon.—Esteban, I think a bottle of the old burgundy?—Vega, my dear," he chided her mildly, "why do you laugh?"

For at last, above all else, Vega's gayety and happiness soared up triumphantly. Perhaps something of the weight of pride was falling from her. Surely she was lifted up by love.

She ran to her father and threw her arms around him.

"It is only that I am so happy, *papa mio,*" she told him, pulling his proud head down to her. "And that I am so proud of you!—And now I am going with—with Esteban for the wine!"

"And I, too!" cried Rapidan.

And the trio, old Esteban between Vega and Rapidan and hugged up by both of them once they were out of sight, went on their joyous errand.

And Don Luis, a picture of complacency, looked up at the gilded ancestors which in turn looked down complacently on him. Ben, though he realized afterward that he must have been mistaken, thought that Don Luis Alarcon, regarding his favorite progenitor, had winked.

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